

THE
NEW YORK TIMES
BESTSELLING
AUTHOR

Eloisa
James

SEDUCTION 2

Two Vows
and a Viscount

Eloisa James is a *New York Times* bestselling author and professor of English literature, who lives with her family in New York, but can sometimes be found in Paris or Italy. She is the mother of two and, in particularly delicious irony for a romance writer, is married to a genuine Italian knight. Visit her at www.eloisajames.com

Praise for Eloisa James:

‘Eloisa James writes with a captivating blend of charm, style, and grace that never fails to leave the reader sighing and falling in love. Nothing gets me to a bookstore faster than a new novel by Eloisa James’

Julia Quinn

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THE SEDUCTION, BOOK II



CHAPTER ONE

IN WHICH WE MEET MISS ELLA ST. TREVELYON

TOWNHOUSE BELONGING TO VISCOUNT ST. TREVELYON

CHELSEA

THE GARDEN.

March 30, 1815

At 3 p.m., Miss Fenella Grey put down the storeroom inventory, donned an afternoon frock, and walked down the lawn to meet her aunt and cousin for tea. The Viscountess St. Trevelyon always asked her to join them, clinging to the idea that Ella was a cherished member of the family.

As opposed to an overworked housekeeper, who happened to be a relation.

The back lawn of the St. Trevelyon townhouse stretched to the Thames River. This afternoon was unseasonably sunny, and the lacy struts of the riverside pagoda shone white against beds of daffodils bending in a light wind. Years ago, Ella's father—the current viscount's brother—had built the pagoda for the delight of his wife and daughter.

To Ella, the memory felt like a storybook she had read but not experienced. Did her mother teach her to embroider there, laughingly complimenting her uneven stitches, or was that a dream? Did her father put her on his shoulders so that she could see into a robin's nest, or was that an imaginary anecdote, spurred by loneliness?

The viscountess and Ella's cousin Fulvia were already seated, looking like an illustration for *La Belle Assemblée*. Even at thirty-two, her aunt's hair matched her daughter's pale gold, and she looked young enough to be Fulvia's elder sister. The family butler, Jarvis, was bending over them, offering a platter of scones. Ella smiled at him. "Did Cook manage to find

currants, Jarvis?”

Jarvis bowed. “At the eleventh hour, my lady. The scones are still hot.” Like his mistress, Jarvis ignored Ella’s lowly position—except during those hours when a housekeeper and butler necessarily work in tandem.

At breakfast, for example, the viscount had announced that he would join the family for tea. Since his lordship’s scones *must* have currants—and since his tantrums dominated not a nursery, but an entire household—Ella and Jarvis had hurriedly dispatched a footman to purchase the desired fruit.

“Ella, darling, do sit down,” the viscountess said. She waved the plate of scones away. “Oh, no, I mustn’t eat a thing, Jarvis. My waistline is swelling in a most unbecoming fashion.”

“You had very little breakfast, my lady,” the butler murmured.

“Ella, I’ve seen that gown one hundred times at least,” Fulvia said, wrinkling her nose. “There’s no reason for you to wear rags. Mother, you must insist that my cousin accompany us to a *modiste*.”

“I scarcely go anywhere,” Ella pointed out, accepting a currant-studded scone and a piece of cake to boot. She had been working since five in the morning and had worked up a ravenous appetite.

“But you *shall* accompany us to the ball celebrating Fulvia’s debut, and those that follow during the Season,” her aunt said with a warm smile. “Your uncle remarked at dinner last night that your absence might cause people to question your virtue. More importantly, you, too, need to find a husband. So, you must order new gowns for the evening and yes, for morning calls as well. Fulvia is right, dear, you cannot receive gentlemen callers in that faded calico.”

Jarvis handed her a teacup, and their eyes met with an unspoken understanding: The viscountess was darling, but hopelessly impractical. How could Ella, who was given neither an allowance nor a salary, afford even one evening gown, let alone an entire wardrobe?

“His lordship is coming!” the viscountess exclaimed, putting down her teacup.

Sure enough, Viscount St. Trevelyon was striding down the lawn, frowning as he adjusted the frothing lace at his wrists. An imaginative person might think that a chilly wind accompanied him; Ella fancied that the grass withered beneath his feet.

Certainly, her aunt looked frost-bitten on a regular basis.

“Ella, mend your bearing!” the viscountess hissed. “And Fulvia, a more

ladylike expression, if you please.”

Fulvia obediently put on a simpering smile. Ella crossed her legs at the ankle and folded her hands. Her uncle preferred that ladies be entangled in their own limbs, unable to run screaming from the room.

Ella considered her uncle akin to a wolf: carnivorous and prone to howling. Everyone in the household had learned to read the apex predator’s moods. As his lordship was manifestly unimaginative, he dressed in black when angry, and in colors when merely piqued. Today the viscount was wearing a bronze-colored velvet coat lined with striped, green silk. His neckcloth was olive and tied in the Mathematical.

So: a good mood, scowl notwithstanding.

When the viscount reached them, his wife and daughter sprang to their feet and dropped into deep curtsies, heads bowed. Ella stood up but didn’t bother to bow her head; her curtsy barely escaped being disrespectful.

As a penniless relation literally relegated to the attic, she had to take her pleasures where she could find them.

“Viscountess,” Lord St. Trevelyon said, bowing his head. “Daughter.” He paused as he eyed Ella.

“Good afternoon, Uncle,” Ella trilled, smiling with full awareness that he knew her low opinion of his character.

Her aunt seated herself, flipping open a fan that she could hide behind. “Good afternoon, Lord St. Trevelyon. How are you this fine afternoon?”

The viscount ignored her question, preoccupied by nudging the woolen pad tied to his right calf into position. Ella had noticed that her uncle had begun stuffing his stockings to enhance the appearance of his thin legs, but the pads had an unfortunate habit of migrating to the front.

She amused herself by imagining her teacup flying through the air, a tide of brown liquid splattering her uncle’s immaculate neck cloth and his chin as well. Her eyes lingered there for a moment; that round chin resembled nothing so much as a speckled egg, no matter how often he shaved.

Drat! That was Unkind Thought #3. Ella was trying to limit herself to four unkind thoughts a day, a mission to ensure that she didn’t become an embittered spinster.

Old maid she would certainly be, since no matter how her aunt talked of marriage, her only prospects were serving as an unpaid housekeeper or becoming a governess. Still, she refused to curdle like sour milk. Her parents would have expected more from her.

Actually, her mother and father would have expected her to debut with Fulvia as her companion. But that was life. After her parents perished six years ago, she and her cousin had promptly switched places in the world.

With a wave of his slender hand, the viscount sent Jarvis back to the house. "I bring good tidings of great joy."

Ella caught back a laugh at her uncle's quotation of the biblical announcement of the baby Jesus's birth. Her uncle was no angel. That did not count as Unkind Thought #4, because it was an evident truth.

He cast her a dark look, apparently catching the amusement in her eyes.

"How wonderful," her aunt chirped. "May I pour you a cup of tea, my lord? It is a custom blend of Pekoe and Imperial."

"I scarcely think that a custom blended tea is required when the viscountess is not entertaining guests."

His wife flinched and started nervously stirring her tea.

"*Au contraire*," Ella exclaimed. "Ladies drink it in order to control their appetites, Uncle. You, of all people, understand the importance of a slender figure." She beamed at his scowl. Her uncle was fanatical on the subject of women's figures and regularly put his wife on slimming diets.

Luckily, Ella and Jarvis conspired to supply buttered toast so that her aunt didn't faint from privation.

"Gluttony may be curbed in other ways," the viscount said bitingly. "No sugar, for instance."

The viscountess guiltily put down her spoon.

Fulvia sighed. "This subject is distasteful. I, for one, would like to hear the good news. I trust yours has to do with my debut? We are perilously close to the ball to celebrate the celebratory ball, with scarcely a new garment on hand."

The viscount surveyed his daughter from head to foot. Fulvia smirked back at him with complete confidence, tossing her curls behind her shoulder. Ella had to admit that her cousin was a match for her bullying father. His most withering comments flowed past her like water through a sieve: she simply did not hear them.

"Thank God, you inherited your mother's beauty," his lordship pronounced, with acid emphasis. "That gown, Daughter, is unrefined." The bodice of Fulvia's gown was trimmed in inexpensive white satin ruffles that took on a yellow tint in the sunshine.

"True, it lacks a diamond bracelet," his daughter replied, demonstrating

her nimble ability to ignore censure. “*La Belle Assemblée* said last month that a string of pearls or diamonds should accent a lady’s upper arm.”

The viscount’s eyes slid, snakelike, to his wife. “I consider it your failure that our daughter looks as overdone as a butcher’s wife on Sunday.”

Ella hastily intervened. “My aunt did suggest that the gown was over-trimmed.”

“Her opinion is irrelevant!” Fulvia retorted. “I understand fashion better than either of you. You must admit, Mother, that your ideas are hopelessly out of date. Your sleeves are too long, and the fullness of your skirt emphasizes your belly, to call a spade a spade.”

“Fulvia,” Ella said, “ ‘belly’ is not a word that a young lady should utter. Nor should she be impertinent to her mother.”

“I apologize, Mother,” Fulvia said with a shrug.

“How interesting.” Her uncle’s eyes narrowed. “I see.”

“Just what do you see?” Fulvia demanded. “I ought to be about London ordering clothing, Father. Have you forgotten the ball?”

“I see that it’s a good thing I have arranged your marriage,” her father answered.

Fulvia squeaked and clapped her hands. “Marvelous! To who, Father?”

“To whom,” Ella amended.

“Lord Peregrine.”

“The man who used to be betrothed to Lady Regina, the sister of the Duke of Lennox?” Fulvia asked. She was an assiduous reader of the gossip columns.

“Don’t worry about competition. You’re as beautiful as she,” her father said, “and certainly more chaste, since I kept you in the country, and she spent last year racketing about Town.”

“Lady Regina is the daughter of a duke,” the viscountess said, blinking rapidly. “One must hope she doesn’t take Fulvia in dislike.”

Ella’s aunt actively feared social events, a condition driven, to Ella’s mind, by the viscount’s constant disparagement.

“You need to keep the man on a leash,” the viscount said to Fulvia, ignoring his wife again. “The betrothal papers will be signed the morning following your debut ball, after he’s met you. Not that a contract guarantees the marriage. By all accounts, he’d already signed papers when he dropped Lady Regina.”

“Lord Peregrine doesn’t wish to meet Fulvia until the ball?” the

viscountess asked, her brow knitting.

“He’s too busy counting his mountains of sovereigns,” her husband replied with a snort. “More to the point, better he meets her infrequently so he can’t squeak out of the engagement.” He turned to Ella. “It’s up to you to make certain this goes off.”

Ella blinked at him. She was used to responsibility, but ensuring that Fulvia married a man who had discarded a duke’s daughter—a lady whose gowns were surely made by a French *modiste* rather than the village seamstress?

“Lady St. Trevelyon,” the viscount said waspishly to his wife, “I must ask you to attempt to look less hangdog. Your drooping shoulders put one forcibly in mind of a lame donkey.”

Her ladyship instantly straightened. Ella reached over and gave her aunt’s hand a squeeze.

“I shall make up my own mind about whether to marry Lord Peregrine,” Fulvia mused. “It is a lady’s prerogative to reject a gentleman, after all.”

“You will marry the man I chose,” the viscount thundered. He resembled a bull pawing the ground, but his daughter didn’t even glance at him.

Instead, she tapped her chin with a finger. “I shall decide only after the first few weeks of the Season. I must ascertain how well Lord Peregrine dances. Given he is of lesser status, merely a baron, it might determine our future standing in society.”

“A pile of gold trumps a title!” the viscount exclaimed. Then, turning to Ella. “Shake some sense into her before you take her to a *modiste*—and make sure you watch for quality. No cheap satin trim. I told Peregrine that my daughter was exquisite, elegant, and eloquent.”

Even Fulvia was startled by the last. “But Father, you said last week that my head was as empty as a skull.”

“No one expects a woman to be intelligent. Peregrine knows as well as I do that he was asking for the impossible. He *does*, however, have the right to expect his future wife to be tastefully gowned. Let simplicity and elegance be your guide, Ella.”

“How am I to pay for Fulvia’s gowns?” Ella inquired.

Her uncle glared, but she raised an eyebrow, noting the red veins in his eyes and the start of a jowl. “Dear me,” she said sweetly. “You seem quite tired, Uncle. Perhaps you should have fewer snifters of brandy tonight.”

Beside her, her aunt gave a faint sigh. Ella immediately regretted her

comment. The viscount took out his temper on his wife. Hours of irascible male shouting often echoed from his lady's bedchamber.

"You shall inform them that I will settle the bill when I choose to do so," he snapped.

"Surely it would be better to know how much you would like us to spend," Lady St. Trevelyon said nervously. "Ella will need a wardrobe as well."

"As will my aunt," Ella pointed out. "I shall require several hundred guineas, not to mention funds for Fulvia's debut ball."

"Every *modiste* in London would consider it an honor to outfit the only daughter of Viscount St. Trevelyon," her uncle said, with complete confidence. That was typical: St. Trevelyon squandered whatever money entered the household, expecting everyone from the baker to the tailor to ignore unpaid bills due to the privilege of serving a nobleman.

"They will not consider it an honor," Ella said flatly. "Any more than does the butcher. As a result of which, dinner will include fish tonight, without a meat course."

"My daughter is marrying Lord Peregrine, one of the richest men in the country," his lordship countered. "Given your parsimonious housekeeping, I shall dine at my club tonight."

Ella managed not to roll her eyes. Apparently, her uncle hoped that Peregrine would pay off his wife's wardrobe as part of the marriage settlement. "*Modistes* will expect Fulvia's father, not her fiancé, to pay her bills. You yourself said that Lord Peregrine is notorious for breaking a betrothal."

Her uncle shrugged. "Your father left this estate in appalling disorder, and you've only made it worse. I rue the day I allowed you to take over the accounts."

As if he had been doing her a favor when he fired the previous housekeeper and told Ella—at the age of fourteen—that she had to earn her keep? Outrage swelled in Ella's chest.

The viscountess's eyebrows knit. "What on earth do you mean, Lord St. Trevelyon?" Her fan was visibly trembling.

"The baker is unpaid," Ella said bluntly. "As is the wainwright, the brewer, my uncle's tailor, and his perfumer." She met the viscount's eyes squarely. "I cannot acquire garments befitting your daughter's betrothal to one of the richest men in London without funds."

Her aunt drew in a startled breath, and even Fulvia gaped at her father.

His lordship showed no sign of shame. “Blame my feckless brother, who didn’t leave provision for his own offspring, let alone the estate. Close your mouth, Fulvia! You look like an oyster-wife bawling her wares.”

“No money for the debut,” the viscountess gasped. She had dropped her fan and was wringing her hands. “But, Lord St. Trevelyon, that costly portrait of myself and Fulvia—”

“You don’t think I paid the man, do you? Sir Thomas Lawrence had the honor of presenting a portrait of the two most beautiful women in England at the Royal Academy. That portrait led to Fulvia’s betrothal to Lord Peregrine, by the way. He’d seen it.”

“We didn’t need a new carriage ...” his wife said in a weak voice.

He rearranged his cuffs. “As viscount, I must maintain my station.”

“You must outfit your daughter if you wish this wedding to go through,” Ella stated.

“No, I mustn’t,” he retorted, dark humor in his voice. “*You* must, Niece. *You* manage the finances for this household. Either you outfit your cousin and your aunt, and I suppose yourself, or Fulvia doesn’t marry. *Ever*. You three can go back to the country and molder there, for all I care.”

Fulvia began to wail, but he raised his voice.

“God knows, the marriage will be off if Lord Peregrine catches sight of those grotesque ruffles.”

CHAPTER TWO

LORD PEREGRINE ARRANGES TO MARRY ... A WOMAN HE'S NEVER MET

THE SAVOY CLUB
THE GAME ROOM

“**Y**ou are not planning to meet your future wife until her debut ball?”

Fiennes Lawrence Peregrine shrugged at Lord Devin’s incredulous expression. “Would it make you feel better about the fact that I bought a woman sight unseen if I told you that I just did the same with a pair of matched grays?”

Devin was a cheerful fellow with a bouquet of sisters and a romantic temperament. From his glowering expression, that information did not make him feel better. “You plan to have children with this lady. To *live* with her. What if she’s buck-toothed or worse?”

“After the first two years of marriage, my parents never lived together again,” Fiennes said. “I won’t martyr myself if we’re incompatible. As far as looks, Lawrence painted her and her mother for the Academy exhibit. You must have seen the St. Trevelyon portrait—both of them flaxen-haired, dewy-eyed, dimpled.”

“There’s more to marriage than dimples,” Lord Devin retorted. “Your parents were reckless to have an heir and no spare. The barony might have gone to a cousin.”

Fiennes leaned over the snooker table and pocketed a red ball. “My mother refused to see my father ever again after she overheard an insult. As you can imagine, that precluded further offspring.”

Devin raised an eyebrow. “What did your father say about her, if you don’t

mind my asking?”

“Family lore—that is, the butler—has it that Father informed a friend that his mistress ‘gabbled like a goose,’ but his wife ‘chattered like a whole flock of daws.’ He had a vivid turn of phrase, and unfortunately, he didn’t like women very much.”

“Yet he had a wife and a mistress. I gather your mother had no idea?” Devin asked, leaning one hip against the snooker table.

“If you remember, my mother created a scandal by running away with my father. She considered it a true love match, guaranteeing fidelity, I suppose. Once she realized her feelings were not reciprocated, she retired to the country. When my father was in residence, she stayed in the dower house.” Two more red balls followed the first.

“Didn’t he die there?” Devin asked with clear fascination. “She wouldn’t see him even on his deathbed?”

“No, but I was there, and I need to marry a nobleman’s daughter in order to fulfill my father’s dying wish. My father thought well of St. Trevelyon’s brother, the late viscount, and said he’d like me to marry the viscount’s daughter. He met her when she was a girl.”

“Your father met the daughter of the late viscount or the current one?”

Fiennes walked around the table, bent over, and pocketed another ball. “Current. His lordship recalled my father being introduced to his daughter Fulvia.”

“I suppose that’s something,” Devin said.

“St. Trevelyon assured me that his daughter is a quiet girl who’s been raised entirely in the country. I’d rather my future wife didn’t have Lady Regina’s ambitions to rule society, since I have developed a strong distaste for fashionable activities.”

“That’s not a good enough reason to betroth yourself to the woman sight unseen.”

“I will see her. I told St. Trevelyon I’ll sign the papers the morning after her debut ball. Lawrence’s portraits are notoriously flattering, after all. Red balls are gone. Yellow nominated.”

“Isn’t it my turn now?”

“No.”

“I heard a story about St. Trevelyon,” Devin mused. “A friend of Prinny’s, isn’t he?”

Fiennes had no fondness for the Prince of Wales. “I’ve no idea.” He began

rapidly potting the remaining balls.

Devin snapped his fingers. "That's right! I remember now. St. Trevelyon bet 500 guineas on Napoleon escaping from Elba."

"Won that one," Fiennes commented, rounding the table again.

"Actually, he lost, since he bet that the Italians would keep the Emperor penned up," Devin said. "Rumor has it that he's run off his legs. Are you certain of the dowry?"

"Stocks and bonds," Devin said. "We didn't get into the specifics."

"It isn't much fun to watch you gambol around the table, sinking all the balls."

Fiennes drilled another ball into its pocket.

Devin sighed and folded his arms. "So, you're going to marry a supposedly intelligent girl whom your father met a decade ago? For heaven's sake, man, I'd have thought you'd learned better after the debacle with Lady Regina. You didn't know what she was like behind closed doors, and it didn't turn out well, did it?"

"It hardly matters, as I've never met a woman I'd like to marry. No, that's not true. I might have married Miss Valentine, now the Duchess of Lennox."

"Who wouldn't have?" Devin said, a palpable edge of regret in his voice. "I scarcely got to dance with her before Lennox scooped her up. Turns out she was an heiress, did you know that?"

Fiennes didn't need an heiress. His father had made a fortune, and he had doubled it.

"Course, it doesn't matter to you," Devin muttered. "The papers claim the Golden Ball is the richest man in England, but I fancy you have him beat."

"An uncouth subject," Fiennes said, sinking the last ball. "Do you want to play again?"

"What's the bloody point?" Devin asked. "I hardly put my hand on a cue before you beat me. I've never made it past three reds." He put the cue down and fixed Fiennes with a stern look. "You're making a mistake. A huge mistake."

"I never knew you were such a romantic," Fiennes said, grinning at his friend.

"I'm not a romantic. I'm practical. At the very least, you need a wife who is affable and well-behaved, wouldn't you agree? You can't tell that from a couple of dances."

"My mother cannot be described as such," Fiennes said, pulling up the red

balls.

“Yes, and your father died with merely his son in attendance. I’m not suggesting that you should fall in love. Frankly, it’s not gentlemanly, and it leads to appalling manners. It’s had a terrible effect on Lennox. I traveled to his estate last summer, but he wouldn’t accompany me to the racetrack because his wife didn’t wish to go.”

“Happy, is he?”

“As a Sunday in Paris,” Devin confirmed. “I couldn’t round a corner without finding him kissing the duchess.”

“I’m in no danger of that,” Fiennes said. “I wouldn’t even know how to go about it.”

Devin hooted. “*Kissing?*”

“Don’t be an ass. Falling in love.” Fiennes started pulling out the red balls and arranging them in a tight triangle.

“The Lennoxes are an embarrassing pair,” Devin said. “But you should at least kiss this woman before you sign the betrothal papers. What if she has bad breath or a wooden tooth? Sanderson nearly choked to death on a strumpet’s wooden molar. She was furious and charged him double.”

“Would you like another game?”

“Only if we wager on it.”

Fiennes sighed. “In your own estimation, you’ve never sunk more than three red balls. I don’t take money from babes.”

“Not for money.”

“Then?”

“A kiss.”

“Given the opera-dancer on your knee last night, I’ve always assumed that you had no interest in kissing me,” Fiennes said wryly.

Devin laughed. “Were I so inclined, I wouldn’t choose anyone with such an insolent look. Not to mention the fact that you don’t shave more than once a day. No, I mean that you would have to kiss your would-be fiancée before you sign the betrothal papers.”

“You do realize that you’ve never won a game of snooker in my memory?”

“A kiss,” Devin insisted.

“Fine.” Fiennes handed over the cue. “You break, and I’ll give you ten points.”

“No need for handicaps,” Devin said blithely. “Cupid will be on my side.”

Twenty minutes later, the final ball disappeared into a pocket. Fiennes smiled and slapped Devin on the back. “Game over.”

“Assemble the balls,” Devin demanded. “We’ll play again—and Eros will have his tribute!”

CHAPTER THREE

SPINNING STRAW INTO GOLD WOULD BE A USEFUL SKILL

Ella stared at her uncle in disgust. “I can’t pay the butcher’s bill. How do you expect me to come up with a wardrobe for Fulvia’s debut?”

They both knew that he regularly overspent to the point of bankruptcy, though Ella tried to protect his wife and daughter from the truth. Managing bills was easier in the country where they ate their own vegetables and baked their own bread.

Her father, the late viscount, had run the household on the proceeds of his Northern estate of some two thousand acres; her uncle regularly spent the annual revenue within weeks, and spent the rest of the year racking up debt.

“That will do. Your tone edges into insolence, Niece. Beware my temper. If I decide not to extend my charity any further, you’ll be out the door.”

“No, no,” his wife clucked. “Ella is dear to us—my only niece.”

“More to the point, you can’t do without me,” Ella remarked. “Just think how much a housekeeper would cost, Uncle.”

“I disdain your meanness, the smallness of your mind. Almost, I would suspect that your mother played my late brother false.”

Furious, and about to clarify exactly what she thought of *his* meanness, Ella caught sight of her aunt’s face. The viscountess had beauty still, but the relentless battering of her husband’s temper had done its work. Now her delicate face looked drawn; her lips had turned white; she seemed on the point of a swoon.

“Never mind Ella’s manners,” Fulvia said impatiently. “What are you saying, Father? How can there be no funds for my debut?”

“The fault of my improvident brother,” her father said. “The Northern estates scarcely produce a penny these days.”

“Because you have not authorized repairs or even seeding,” Ella pointed out. “You take and take, Uncle, and no land can thrive under those

circumstances.”

“My needs are few,” the viscount said, brushing off her complaint with a wave of his hand. “I covet nothing other than those few necessities to support the rank to which I am entitled. I feel certain, Niece, that you could have done a far better job at housekeeping than you have done in these last years.”

“I have economized wherever possible,” Ella said stonily.

“Indeed, she has,” her aunt put in. “Just look at her gown, Viscount. It is five years old, if it is a day.”

“The line of it is marred by that ring of keys,” his lordship said coolly. “Other than that, I see nothing wrong. If ladies’ waistlines are higher these days, it scarcely matters to a dowry-less girl.”

Ella curled her fists. When her parents died, her uncle had announced that Ella’s father had left her nothing. She didn’t believe it; she had *never* believed it, and she never would. She clearly remembered her father signing the will that entailed his estate in Norfolk on her children.

“I’m not leaving the estate to you, dear girl, but to your children,” her father had said, smiling. “I don’t want fortune-hunters after you, more than they will be already.”

As soon as she was of age, Ella had written to the family solicitor, only to find that the late viscount had supposedly never written a will, and since as a woman she could not inherit, everything had gone to her uncle. She and Jarvis had searched the house for the will he witnessed, but never found it.

“Never mind that!” Fulvia cried. “My debut, Father. My *fiancé*! What of him? How am I to meet Lord Peregrine wearing rags?” Her voice rising: “What of the ball, already announced?”

That was true. Invitations to the St. Trevelyon Ball, themed “Starry, Starry Night,” had been dispatched two months ago.

“I pity your vulgarity, Daughter,” the viscount said dispassionately. “I did not come into this world merely for your support and enjoyment. I consider my responsibility to you finished when I secured you an excellent fiancé.”

“Since you informed the man in question that Fulvia is elegant, you will have to sell the new carriage to finance a wardrobe,” Ella told him.

“I cannot,” he replied. “It suffered an accident and is at the wheelwright, who mean-spiritedly refuses to release it until his bill is paid.”

“Oh, no,” his wife gasped. “There was an accident? You could have been injured!”

“Actually, no. I believed my horses capable of crossing London Bridge

without a driver, but there it is. One is constantly disappointed in this world.”

“You placed a wager on a driverless carriage, without consideration of the consequences,” Ella stated.

A chill passed through his eyes. “If my wife had come to me with an adequate estate, I should not consider twice the loss of such a paltry thing, a few slats of wood.”

The viscountess was twisting her hands. “I shall ... What shall I do? I could sell my ruby necklace!”

Her husband glanced at her.

“I suspect your rubies have been exchanged for glass,” Ella said.

“In a moment of perplexity,” the viscount said, without a flash of remorse.

The viscountess dashed away a tear. “I see.”

“I surely needn’t remind you that all your possessions are mine under law,” he told her.

“Certainly not,” she faltered.

“Shall I withdraw the invitations to the ball?” Ella asked.

“You may not!” Fulvia cried. “Father says you have responsibility for the household, and that means you *must* find the funds to buy me a wardrobe. Lord Peregrine isn’t signing papers until the day following. No nip-cheesing, either—we must have champagne and a luxurious supper. Everything befitting the only daughter of a viscount!”

Ella realized suddenly that she had lost track of the number of Unkind Thoughts of the day. But surely today was an exception? After all, she too was the only daughter of a viscount, and yet she carried a housekeeper’s rings.

“How shall I fulfill Fulvia’s demands, Uncle?” she inquired, managing to keep her voice even. “You know as well as I do that the household accounts are unpaid. We are lucky not to have bailiffs occupying the kitchen. Believe me, no *modiste* will extend us her custom, given the notoriety of your unpaid tailor’s debts. And no grocer will supply us with the necessary victuals for a ball. Champagne is out of the question.”

“It’s in your hands,” the viscount said. “I actually envy you, Niece. You have an ability that I have not. The time has come to repay the kindness of this family to you, a penniless orphan.”

“What are you talking about?” Ella asked in exasperation.

“Your mother’s diadem.”

“My mother’s diadem?” She had no idea what her uncle was talking about.

He sighed. "A circlet of diamonds, as I understand it. The family solicitors have reserved it for you."

Ella knew instantly what had happened. "You tried to sell it and were refused?"

"I have supported you since your improvident parents left this world. I considered it my right. But now I admit that in retrospect its withholding was useful. It presents a solution to our current complication."

"Sell it," Fulvia said, turning to Ella. Her eyes were shining with determination. "Sell it, and I shall repay you once I marry Lord Peregrine."

"I applaud your spirit," her father said, taking out a handkerchief lined in *Valenciennes* lace and handing it to his wife, who was shaking with silent sobs.

"I didn't know that my mother had left me anything," Ella said, dumbfounded.

"The solicitors will sell it for you," her uncle said. "I shall bring you the funds—"

"No, you will not," she interrupted. "If I am to sell my mother's gift to support the debut of your daughter, Uncle, I shall visit the solicitors and handle the funds myself."

"You certainly are a practical woman of business," he said, with extreme distaste.

"Thanks to you," she retorted.

"It's not fair," the viscountess said, her voice breaking, blotting her eyes. "Surely you could sell your diamond cufflinks, Husband?"

"Glass," he said promptly. "No, if our niece wishes to play any role in polite society, she'll have to fund the Season, including the ball. I would guess the tiara will garner two hundred sovereigns, more than enough to clothe Fulvia and her mother, with a gown or two left over for you. You may wish to reserve a few pounds for the baker, although given the state of my wife's waistline, it would be better to avoid starchy foods."

He rose to his feet. "I expect you will be grateful to me for giving you the opportunity to enjoy the pleasures of generosity, Niece. I shall hope to see a renewed respect in your attitude."

He apparently read Ella's expression.

"If not, I may well leave you at home when we go to balls," he continued. "After all, your name does not appear on any invitation. Only my liberality would allow you to accompany us as a member of my family."

He left before Ella could assure him that respect was the last thing she would ever feel for him.

It was at least an hour before she could return to the house. Her aunt lapsed into hysterics and finally tottered back to her bedchamber on the butler's arm. Halfway up the lawn, she must have grown faint, because when Ella glanced in that direction, Jarvis was carrying her up the slope. Luckily, their butler had strong arms.

Rather surprisingly, Fulvia did not become hysterical.

After her initial shock, she showed little surprise at the news that her father was improvident and (to Ella's mind) a conniving criminal. Instead, Fulvia focused on what needed to be done, showing a practical side that she'd never revealed before.

"I don't have a dowry, do I?" Fulvia asked.

"I doubt it," Ella admitted.

"No wonder he never allowed us to visit London or Bath, nor even go to a local assembly," her cousin spat. "No wonder we are never invited to pay calls on the neighbors. *And* that explains why we've been sitting at home since arriving in London!"

"To be fair, your mother does not enjoy going into company."

"I've long known that I had no respect for my father, but I am shocked by the depths to which he's fallen," Fulvia said grimly. "I may have grown up in the country, but I shall overcome it. I intend to become one of the most fashionable ladies in London. Did you see how my father curled his lip at this gown?"

"Yes," Ella said.

"I rarely pay much attention to his comments, because he is so unkind," her cousin said.

"I thought you didn't notice!"

"Of course I notice. I decided long ago that I could become a downtrodden mouse like my mother, or I could pretend not to listen. I find the latter policy to be highly successful. You spend far too much energy sparring with him."

"I shall take that under advisement," Ella said, stunned.

"I gather two hundred sovereigns will not pay for three wardrobes and the ball?"

"I only need a gown or two."

Now that Fulvia was enraged, her blue eyes had deepened to an uncanny resemblance to her father's. "You *will* marry this Season, Ella, as shall I. I

will repay you for your mother's diadem. My father be damned."

Ella cleared her throat. "I'm actually not very interested in marriage."

"Don't be a fool," her cousin snapped. "Do you want to spend your life as my father's housekeeper or follow him to debtor's prison if he figures out how to consign his bills to you?"

"No!"

"We need husbands," Fulvia stated. "And Ella, make no mistake. I may not cross swords with my father, but have you ever seen me not get what I want?"

Ella thought it over. Fulvia had wanted her portrait painted by Lawrence, and it had been. Fulvia had wanted to go to a pantomime in a country inn, and they had attended.

"No."

Fulvia squared her shoulders. "I shall not allow him to stand in my way." She sprang to her feet with all the formidable energy her father radiated when enraged and stamped up the lawn without another word, her yellowing satin ruffles fluttering in the breeze.

Ella slowly walked after her cousin, thinking about the fact that her mother had left her the diadem. A gift. When she reached the house, she went straight to her room—or rather, straight to the attic. She had appropriated the space when they arrived in London, though her aunt would not have begrudged her the chamber she occupied as a girl.

The upsetting truth was that sleeping two floors above the family bedchambers meant that Ella would be spared the sound of her uncle ranting at his wife.

The attic was a long room that ran the width of the house. The ceiling was not overly low; a grown man could stand without difficulty. True, it was rather hot under the eaves in the afternoon, but presumably the viscountess would return to the country before July.

Trailing unpaid bills, Ella thought wryly.

She walked through the door and promptly dropped to her knees. An adorable little face peeked out from around her chair, and her pet squirrel bounded over with excited squeaks. "Who's the sweetest squirrel in the world?" Ella crooned, putting Joe on her shoulder and running a finger down his red striped back. He cocked his tiny head, his black eyes shining with happiness to see her. "Who is growing the fluffiest tail that ever graced a squirrel in Christendom?"

She reached in her pocket and pulled out a bit of scone, putting it on the wood floor. "Currants, Joe! You've never had those before." He leapt to the ground with the reckless joy that accompanied everything he did.

Ella had snatched him from a dog's mouth eight months ago. He had been just a baby, and she had felt certain he would perish, but instead he'd rallied. Rather than the thin, bedraggled creature she'd rescued, he now glowed with health, his tummy plump from eating anything and everything Ella gave to him.

These days he spent his time prancing in and out of the dormer windows, making his way to the ground via an oak tree. Now he ran across the room and fetched an acorn bigger than his head, dragging it across the floorboards toward her. She brought him scones; he brought her acorns.

"Two gifts. It might as well be my birthday," Ella told him, her voice husky as she thought of her mother.

Before Joe got very far, a streak of gray flashed across the floor, snatched the acorn, and scampered away.

The squirrel tumbled over his feet and sprang up, chattering angrily.

"Starlight!" Ella called. "Naughty kitty, bring back Joe's acorn."

Starlight began running in circles by the bed, showing off the acorn in her mouth. Having only three legs, she wasn't able to climb down the tree the way Joe did, so she amused herself by making mischief.

Enraged, Joe disappeared, so Ella went over and picked up her cat, putting the acorn back on the floor where it could be easily found. Starlight deigned to rub her head against Ella's shoulder, and they sank into a rocking chair liberated from the nursery.

Twilight was falling, and narrow streaks of violet light filtered through the narrow dormer windows. It had been a wretched day.

Ella felt subsumed by a burning rage at her uncle ... at life ... even at her parents for leaving her. Her uncle certainly didn't love her, but he had never before threatened to throw her into the street.

"He is deplorable," she told Starlight, who responded by jumping down and returning to her small bed, nestled against the warm chimney that led to the kitchen.

Joe popped back into view and began trundling the acorn under Ella's bed.

"How can I possibly ask a *modiste* to make sufficient evening dresses for my aunt and cousin, let alone myself, with a mere two hundred guineas?" Ella's voice was shaky, but she refused to cry. She swallowed back tears, and

called, “Joe, I thought that acorn was for me?”

He had disappeared, so Ella went over and got down on her knees. A hatbox lay on its side under her bed, empty but for the acorn. Presumably it had once held a frivolous scrap of finery that her mother had worn to a party.

She pulled the hatbox out and discovered “Quimby’s Costume Emporium” inscribed on its side. Not for a party, then, but a costume ball—and she remembered which one. Ella had probably been around six years old when she’d been invited to join her mother and father in the drawing room before they left for a Yuletide masquerade ball. Her father had been dressed as the North Wind with a crown of icicles, and her mother as his consort.

Ella suddenly remembered the diadem: a spray of diamonds nestled into her mother’s red curls. Not that Ella had known what the stones were; her memory was of sparkles entwined with her mother’s laughter.

Tears began flowing down her cheeks, no matter how hard she tried to keep them back. Feeling like an old woman rather than a girl of scarcely twenty, she went back to the rocking chair. Joe climbed to her shoulder, and Starlight leapt onto her lap. The three of them rocked back and forth to the sound of Starlight’s rusty purr and Ella’s occasional sob, until her lantern reflected in the black panes of her windows, and she was calm enough to think.

In addition to the gowns and the ball, she had to pay the butcher and the baker. Her uncle held fast to his conviction that the world was honored to serve him, but Ella knew that unpaid debts led to hungry children.

“He’s a criminal,” she whispered, and Starlight’s rumbling purr seemed to agree.

She couldn’t think of anything they could sell other than her mother’s gift. Her uncle had sold everything of value, including the family portraits. The attic held a few trunks containing clothing, but the apparel was hopelessly out of date. Some of the trunks might even contain garments belonging to the very first viscountess.

She could probably find a gown that would fit Fulvia, but “Starry, Starry Night” hadn’t been announced as a masquerade ball.

Joe leapt down and scrambled onto the bed where Ella had tossed the hatbox. She watched listlessly as he tried to drag her nightcap inside.

Then she straightened.

Modistes charged a fortune.

But costumers? How much was a costume?

How much would it cost to costume a “viscountess” or a “young lady”?

CHAPTER FOUR

FAIRY GODMOTHERS COME IN DIFFERENT GUISES

One week later, the St. Trevelyon town coach pulled up before a building with a large glass window. The sign above proclaimed that Quimby's Fashion Emporium was a "Purveyor to Drury Lane Theater & More." Its window displayed the brocade gown of a medieval lady, complete with ermine trim and a conical hat with a veil falling in graceful folds to the floor.

"I hope you know what you're doing," Fulvia muttered to Ella as she climbed out.

Her mother followed, a handkerchief pressed to her mouth. "I feel as if I might spew," she whispered.

"The carriage does jolt horribly around corners," Ella said, taking her aunt's arm. "I expect that the springs are flattened by age. You are white as new snow, Aunt, but you'll feel better in a moment."

She guided the viscountess up the front steps, Fulvia behind them. They walked into an open room where three women clustered around a man standing on a platform before a huge mirror. One of them was on her knees, pinning the hem of the man's breeches.

A stout woman turned and began walking toward them, smiling. "Good morning. I am Mrs. Quimby," she said, dropping a curtsy.

"This room is so hot," the viscountess moaned, her handkerchief pressing even more firmly against her lips.

"Good morning," Ella said to Mrs. Quimby. "I'm afraid that my aunt is not feeling well. Would it be possible for her to repose herself in privacy?"

"Of course," Mrs. Quimby exclaimed, guiding them toward a door that led to a snug sitting room. Ella's aunt gratefully sank onto the settee. A few minutes later, she already looked better: worn but comforted, a cool cloth on her head and a steaming cup of tea beside her on a small table.

"I've asked one of my seamstresses to loosen her ladyship's stays, which will have her feeling better in no time," Mrs. Quimby said, ushering Ella out

of the room and shutting the door. “A little peace and quiet, and your aunt will be right as rain.”

“Thank you,” Ella said, smiling at the kindly woman. “My cousin—” Suddenly she realized Fulvia had not accompanied them into the back room. She pivoted, discovering that Fulvia had walked over to the platform and was chatting with the gentleman being fitted.

“He’s fully clothed,” Mrs. Quimby said quickly. “I’d not allow anyone to see one of my customers in a state of undress. We use this room for a final fitting as it has the grand mirror. Perhaps your cousin saw Mr. Woodward on the stage at Drury Lane? Young ladies are always curious to meet actors.”

Ella shook her head. But after all, two seamstresses were there as well; this “Mr. Woodward” surely wouldn’t make an improper comment under those circumstances.

“What can I help you with, Miss? A costume ball, perhaps?” Mrs. Quimby asked.

Ella was about to answer when Mr. Woodward turned to smile down at Fulvia. He was extraordinarily handsome, all the more so for his gorgeous costume composed of white satin and detailed with gold embroidery. In profile, he had a distinct resemblance to an etching of Jupiter in her old nursery book of Roman gods.

Ella had hoped to speak to Mrs. Quimby in private, but she couldn’t leave Fulvia unchaperoned.

“Thomas Woodward is the new lead at Drury Lane,” Mrs. Quimby said, following her gaze. “His first large role. We’re costuming him for a play called *Catherine and Petruchio*.”

Woodward was wearing a broad hat with a sweeping feather; as they watched, he doffed it in an elegant bow.

“Goodness me, he and your cousin match like china statues, don’t they? Both of them blonde,” Mrs. Quimby commented. “She’s lovely, though that gown does her a disservice, if you don’t mind my frankness. Inexpensive satin is never worth the thrift.”

“Mr. Woodward is quite good-looking,” Ella said, wondering if she ought to interrupt the conversation.

“A dimpled chin’s not enough to keep a man in the lead position,” Mrs. Quimby said, with the air of a woman who had actors traipsing through her emporium daily. “The upcoming role will make or break his future.”

Ella cleared her throat. “I should like to talk to you in private, Mrs.

Quimby, but I hesitate to leave my cousin in company with Mr. Woodward. She's only sixteen, and we've just come from the country."

"As if her gown didn't tell me that," Mrs. Quimby said. Clearly, she was a woman who called a spade a spade. "Mrs. Peebles!"

A matronly lady trotted over.

"I'll be upstairs," Mrs. Quimby said. "Keep a shrewd eye on Mr. Woodward and that young lady. If there's a hint of anything improper about the conversation, you take her away sharpish, do you understand?"

Mrs. Peebles smiled. "There's nothing like that, I assure you. She's curious about the theater, but isn't everyone? Mr. Woodward is explaining how a director chooses a play and decides who to cast in it."

"That's all right," Ella said, relieved. "We've never been to the theater, and my cousin has always loved reading plays."

"You're true country mice," Mrs. Quimby exclaimed. "Now you watch the young lady carefully, Mrs. Peebles."

With that, she led Ella across the room. "You've not seen a performance by a traveling theater company?" she asked, as they climbed a flight of stairs. "We make costumes for companies that spend most of their time touring the island."

"We live deep in the country," Ella explained. "We did go to a Christmas pantomime in a local inn." That had been two years ago, after Fulvia read about it in the local paper and threw such a fit that the viscount escorted them.

Burly men dressed in gowns had sung, danced, and thrown pies at each other. Not one of them resembled Mr. Woodward.

The chamber above was brightly sunlit, dotted with dressmaker's forms clad in half-made garments. Shelves were lined with bolts of fabric in vivid colors and patterns. Huge open barrels held curling feathers like the one that graced the actor's sweeping hat. Lace and ribbons spilled from an open drawer.

"Now what can I do for my country mice?" Mrs. Quimby said, leading Ella to a comfortable settee. "I don't mind telling you, my dear, that I'm feeling sorry for you. Your age, and never been inside a theater! It's a disgrace. Unless your parents are Quakers?"

"My parents aren't alive," Ella admitted. "But no, they weren't Quakers. Actually, you may remember them, as I found one of your hatboxes among my mother's belongings. Thirteen or fourteen years ago, they went to a

masquerade ball dressed as the North Wind and his consort.”

Mrs. Quimby’s brow knit. “I’d have scarcely opened the emporium.” She snapped her fingers. “Viscount St. Trevelyon and his wife. Oh, but they were a lovely—”

She broke off. “They’re no longer with us?” Her eyes looked genuinely distressed.

“I’m afraid not.” Ella smiled. “They had such fun wearing your costumes. I still remember how much my father enjoyed his icicle crown. He wore it at Christmas dinner the following year.”

Mrs. Quimby patted her hand. “I’m so sorry, dear. So very sorry. You are their only daughter?”

Ella nodded.

“You look just like your mother, as I’m sure you know. That’s your aunt downstairs? Thankfully, you have her to care for you. That must be a comfort to your parents as they watch over you from Heaven.”

“No doubt,” Ella murmured.

“The North Wind was one of my first costumes for nobility,” Mrs. Quimby said nostalgically. “My father started the business in a market stall, you see. We were only providing to theaters, not that it isn’t still my primary business, but these days I have a lively business in masquerade balls as well. Do you know the Duchess of Trent?”

Ella shook her head.

“The American Duchess, they call her. She’s a great lover of costume balls. These days I make regular clothing for the gentry as well, those that can’t afford a *modiste*.”

There couldn’t be a better opening. Ella took a deep breath. “Mrs. Quimby, I am one of those ladies.”

The costumer nodded. “I know, dear.”

“You guessed because of our clothing?”

“That, and the fact that I costumed your uncle, Viscount St. Trevelyon, for one of the Regent’s masquerades at Bath. He came with his own design for a fantastical creature. A genie, as I recall.”

“He didn’t pay for it,” Ella guessed, wincing. “I apologize.”

“It happens,” Mrs. Quimby said. “Mind you, I did wish that I hadn’t put so much gold braid on his pantaloons. But no doubt it did my reputation good to have a viscount wearing my costume.”

“That’s what he told you,” Ella said, biting her lip.

To her surprise, Mrs. Quimby chuckled. “He’s a rare one, your uncle. He informed me that he was born to be my benefactor—given that my costume would rub shoulders with the Prince of Wales—and *that* would increase my stock of happiness.” She laughed. “I’ve never forgotten that. The man thought that debt was a privilege of the upper classes!”

Ella’s stomach clenched into a knot. She couldn’t ask Mrs. Quimby for help. “How much does he owe you? I shall make good that obligation.”

The seamstress blinked. “Indeed, you shall not!”

“I have to,” Ella said miserably.

“No, you don’t. The debt is his, and dear, if you don’t mind the advice, never take on the burdens of menfolk, whether they’re family or not. Now, you tell me what you need, and I’ll do my best to help.”

“I can pay,” Ella blurted out. She held up her reticule, bulging with guineas.

“Excellent. I’m guessing you are seeking clothing for the Season. I can put you in garments that won’t put you to shame,” Mrs. Quimby said, “so it’s practically meant that you made your way here, isn’t it? Undoubtedly, your mother is guiding your footsteps.”

“I have a pet squirrel, Joe, who started a nest in your hatbox,” Ella explained. “I noted the name.”

“Squirrels are popular pets these days, aren’t they?” Mrs. Quimby said. “I had an actress bring in the prettiest little animal wearing a gold chain as a leash. She asked me to make it a little cloak so he could be Hamlet.”

“Joe would not care for clothing,” Ella stated, sure of that.

“Now there’s a smile,” Mrs. Quimby said, patting Ella’s hand again. “You’re a lovely lass, and no mistake. Your mother had the same strawberry-colored hair. I have an imperial blue silk somewhere that will have the attention of every man in the room.”

“I don’t wish that kind of attention! It’s my cousin who needs to be elegantly attired,” Ella explained. “My uncle has arranged a betrothal, but the gentleman in question, Lord Peregrine, hasn’t met Fulvia yet, and won’t until the upcoming ball.”

“She needs a ballgown,” Mrs. Quimby said, nodding. “Her mother as well, and you, of course.”

“Something plain for me,” Ella said. “But Fulvia must shine.”

“Oh, she will,” Mrs. Quimby said, sounding amused. “That girl is as shiny as a new guinea. You three will need more than ball gowns. You’ll need tea

gowns, and promenade dresses, and at least two evening dresses. I would hope your uncle has arranged for you both to be presented to the queen?"

"We could never afford court dresses," Ella said, avoiding the question. "I will give you the money I have, but I'm afraid it won't be enough for all the garments you've mentioned. I was wondering if you ever reuse trim from older garments. I have trunks of my mother's clothing, much of it made by Parisian *modistes*, sewn with lace and seed pearls."

"The mice haven't been at them?"

Ella shook her head. "The trunks were locked. The gowns are old-fashioned, but I was hoping that the trim would be useful."

"I'll buy those trunks," Mrs. Quimby exclaimed, clapping her hands. "I often buy whole estates. I take the gowns apart and remake them, or I use them on the stage. You don't think all those queens prancing across London stages are wearing new garments, do you?"

"I've never seen a London stage, let alone a queen atop one," Ella said. "You really mean it, Mrs. Quimby? You aren't saying it merely from kindness?"

"A fine businesswoman I'd be if I handed out money to anyone with a sad story. You keep your guineas," the lady said, coming to her feet. "I'll give you a fair price for every scrap of cloth in those trunks."

"But you must keep back enough to pay my uncle's debt," Ella said, rising as well.

When Mrs. Quimby frowned, Ella added, "I insist. Or I shall go to another costume shop."

"Prideful, aren't you?" She laughed. "Well, so was your father, and not in the way the current viscount is, either. In the real way. You could tell his family had antiquity and importance, but he didn't feel the need to boast about it."

Ella followed the costumer down the stairs, clutching her reticule and thinking that now they could have champagne at the ball, and perhaps even rent some lemon trees.

The viscountess had emerged from the sitting room. She and Fulvia were seated together, arms wreathed around each other's waists, listening to whatever Mr. Woodward was saying.

"Aren't they a picture?" Mrs. Quimby asked, pausing. "That bright hair of your cousin's would be a splash on the stage, I don't mind telling you. It will be a pleasure to clothe your family, indeed it will. Now when is the ball?"

“Just a month away,” Ella said anxiously.

“I can do it. An evening dress for each of you first, then promenade dresses so you can walk in Hyde Park. Ball gowns will take a bit longer. We’ll take your measurements now, and you can all three come for a fitting for the evening gowns in two days. I know *modistes* generally attend ladies in their houses, but I can’t leave the Emporium. Luckily, we’re just now in between productions, since this is the last fitting for *Catherine and Petruchio*.”

“I am so grateful!” Ella said, meaning it.

“You’ll be paying me,” Mrs. Quimby reminded her. “Now we’d better send Woodward off before the young fool starts thinking he might win the hand of a viscount’s daughter.”

Fulvia greeted Mrs. Quimby with a bright smile, as her mother introduced Ella to “London’s foremost actor, Mr. Woodward.”

“We will attend the opening of Mr. Woodward’s play at Drury Lane next Wednesday,” Fulvia announced.

“I could do three evening gowns by then,” Mrs. Quimby said.

“How kind of you to offer tickets,” Ella said to Mr. Woodward.

“Oh no,” Fulvia said. “We’ll be in a box, of course.” She held out her hand to the actor. “It’s been a pleasure to meet you.”

He bowed very low and kissed her hand, his eye shining with an emotion that was certainly admiration and perhaps even more.

“We are looking forward to opening night,” the viscountess told him.

“A box?” Ella asked when he had gone. “Whose box, Fulvia? How can we possibly afford a box?”

CHAPTER FIVE

IN WHICH LORD PEREGRINE MEETS AN EXQUISITE WOMAN (NOT ELLA)

THEATER ROYAL AT DRURY LANE

THE OPENING NIGHT OF CATHERINE & PETRUCHIO

“**Y**ou never go to the theater,” Devin grumbled to Fiennes. “*I* never go to the theater. Now the opera? That’s different. I’d happily accompany you.”

“Only because you are so fond of opera dancers,” Fiennes said, nodding to his coachman, who pulled away from the curb, heading for the mews behind the theater.

“Are those the matched grays you bought sight unseen?” Devin said. “They’re fine goers, I’ll give you that.”

“Thank you,” Fiennes said.

“Why in hell do you even keep a box?” Devin said, as they joined the throng of people streaming through the open doors of the Theater Royal.

“My father was a great lover of the stage. He invested in the refurbishment of this theater, so we have a life lease, as it were. I let them sell the seats most of the time.”

“And why are we coming tonight?”

“It’s your fault,” Fiennes said, tossing his friend a smile over his shoulder.

“No, it’s not!” Devin said, repulsed. “I refused to accompany my sisters to the play, and they finally talked my father into bringing them tomorrow night. They’ve been chirping on and on about the pretty lead actor. I don’t mind a play with blood and swords, one of the roustabout ones. But this is a comedy. Damn it, Fiennes, I’ll be asleep before the second act.”

“You’re turning into a lumpish old man, and you’re barely thirty!”

“As if you’ll stay awake,” Devin scoffed. “Back at Eton, you told the Master that you slept through *King Lear* because iambic pentameter has the same cadence as a lullaby.”

“Ah, but tonight will be different.” They were climbing stairs wallpapered in red velvet, heading for the private boxes.

“Why?”

“I will be entertaining my fiancée,” Fiennes said.

Devin caught his arm. “No!”

“Yes.”

“How on earth—”

“It seems Miss Fulvia St. Trevelyon agrees with you,” Fiennes said. “I received a perfumed note from the lady, kindly informing me that I was to open the family box so that we could converse in a more convivial atmosphere than might be found during a large ball.”

Devin’s eyes widened. “She’s meeting you *unchaperoned*?”

“Don’t be a fool,” Fiennes said. “The viscountess will be here, along with some other relation.”

“Sit in the back where it’s shadowy,” Devin advised.

Fiennes eyed him. “Why?”

“Because you have to kiss her, if you remember!” he said, squawking with laughter.

“Our final game ended when you collected the snooker balls and dropped them into the pockets behind my back, which doesn’t mean you won,” Fiennes pointed out. “I went off to get a slug of whisky and came back to find the table clean.”

“’Twas my only triumph on the snooker table, and you dare not deny it to me,” Devin claimed. “Obviously the gods were on my side, since I was playing from the goodness of my heart.”

“That is precisely why I dragged you here tonight. I have no particular wish to converse with Miss St. Trevelyon, but I trust that you will chatter, as you do, and winkle out the secrets of her character. Thereafter, you can let me know whether I should marry her or not.”

Devin’s mouth fell open. “I should tell you whether to marry her?”

“You seem to care more than I do,” Fiennes said bluntly. He pushed open the door that led to the Peregrine box: a wide balcony with a railing shaped from gold leaves and two rows of red velvet chairs. Their attendant instantly sprang forward and bowed.

“The ladies haven’t yet arrived,” Devin pointed out. “Why the deuce didn’t you escort them, Peregrine?”

“On my reply, acquiescing to the box and the evening, Miss St. Trevelyon announced that her party would join me here. I thought we might as well begin as we mean to go on. By which I mean that I shall follow her instructions in the event that I don’t give a damn either way.”

“Cold-blooded,” Devin muttered, making his way to the front of the balcony.

Fiennes gave the attendant a few coins and sent him off to inform the kitchens that he wanted the very best food and drink offered to his guests during the interval.

When he joined Devin, it seemed to him that the opening night was already a triumph. The entire theater was crammed with people in their finest clothing, talking at the top of their lungs. Most importantly, the Royal Box was occupied; Prinny’s attendance should make the play a success, even if the acting proved dreadful. His Majesty was accompanied by the so-called Carleton House coterie, a raffish group of extravagant peers.

“I wonder if Miss St. Trevelyon has a voucher for Almack’s,” Fiennes said idly, seating himself.

“Why?” Devin raised an eyebrow.

“I promised myself never to visit it again.”

“Tell me you aren’t carrying emotional wounds from your fiancée tossing your diamond ring into the lemonade?”

Fiennes cast him a deadly glance, but Devin just smirked.

“Lady Regina is here as well, accompanied by the duke and duchess,” Devin exclaimed. He rose, bowing toward a box on the opposite side of the theater.

Thankfully, a sound at the rear of the box allowed Fiennes to rise and turn away before he was forced to greet the detestable woman whom he almost married. The door opened ...

A ravishing girl walked in.

It was the only word to describe her. She had honey-colored curls, a sweet chin, dimples, cornflower-blue eyes, a charming figure. In the dim light of the theater, she shone like a star.

Devin had been speaking, but his voice broke off.

Lawrence’s portrait hadn’t exaggerated, even when it came to the viscountess’s looks. The lady seemed tired, but equally beautiful.

Fiennes walked forward and bowed. “I apologize for the awkwardness of this meeting, as that we must introduce ourselves. I am Lord Peregrine.”

“I am the Viscountess St. Trevelyon,” the older lady said in a clear voice. “I offer an apology from my husband, who is attending His Majesty this evening. It is a pleasure to meet you, Lord Peregrine. May I introduce my cherished daughter, Miss Fulvia St. Trevelyon?”

Fiennes was stunned by Fulvia’s beauty, but not so much that he didn’t appreciate the delightful shadowing of her bosom as she curtsied. Damn it, he should have trusted his father’s judgment.

“May I introduce Lord Devin?” Fiennes asked, remembering that his friend stood at his shoulder.

The viscountess said, “I also wish to introduce my dear niece, Miss Fenella St. Trevelyon.” A lady who had been standing toward the rear of the box moved forward and dropped a curtsy.

Fiennes didn’t notice her, other than thinking that the family had peculiar habits in naming. The niece sounded like a leafy vegetable.

Introductions finally concluded, Fiennes escorted his almost-fiancée to the front of the box. Without fuss, Fulvia seated herself closest to the stage, charmingly explaining that she was a great aficionado of the theater, though she’d never been to the Theater Royal. Her eyes were round as she gazed around in awe, and then up at the blue ceiling far above.

The theater was better than Almack’s. He wouldn’t mind going to plays if he was accompanying his delectable wife.

“Lucky bastard,” Devin hissed, elbowing him.

Fiennes cast him a wry smile that agreed. He had no fear that Fulvia would turn out to be another Lady Regina. Her character was written on her face. She was sweetly innocent and utterly charming.

Though she was young, she was independent, given the letter she had written to him. She was also remarkably elegant. Her gown was in the very newest fashion, which suggested that Devin’s sour view of the viscount’s penury had been ill-informed.

Excellent. Fiennes had been reconciled to a father-in-law who’d try to fleece him on a regular basis—something in St. Trevelyon’s eyes had suggested as much—but he was happy to be wrong.

“Have you read this play, Fulvia, if I might address you as such?” he asked.

Her face showed an enchanting flicker of doubt. She opened her fan and

whispered, "Is such intimacy the fashion in London?"

"It is," he said gravely. "Although only among those like ourselves, who have an understanding."

"I shouldn't want to be thought fast," Fulvia said. She glanced over at the viscountess. "Perhaps you might, although not in circumstances when my mother could hear you."

He caught back a smile, thinking of brash, fortune-hunting ladies who would leap to address him with such familiarity. "My name is Fiennes."

"How odd," she said with a charming giggle. "Both of our names are unusual and begin with an F."

"That is true."

"I have not read the play," Fulvia told him. "In truth, I have read few modern plays, only those by Shakespeare and his contemporaries. My father has stern ideas about what ladies should and shouldn't read. My cousin is frightfully intelligent and reads all sorts of books behind his back, but this is the first time either of us have been to a real performance."

Fiennes glanced over at the bookish cousin, but she had her back to him, tucking a shawl around the viscountess's shoulders. Devin had obviously realized that his role was to keep the lady and her companion occupied; he was giving the ladies his most beguiling smile.

Fiennes felt a surge of affection. Devin was a good fellow. A true friend.

"Have you heard much about this production?" Fulvia asked.

"Merely that a pretty fellow plays the lead."

"Mr. Thomas Woodward is making his introduction to the London theater-going audience," she told him. "More precisely, his introduction as a lead. He has played smaller roles, and toured Italy and France, although I believe he grew up in Suffolk."

Fiennes was somewhat startled. "You *are* interested in the theater, aren't you?"

"As I told you," she told him, sweetly, but with a pointed note in her voice. "You do know that the role of Petruchio in Shakespeare's play has been played to this date by John Kemble, opposite his wife? Mr. Woodward faces a challenge to better such a famous actor."

The viscount had rightly boasted of his daughter's intelligence. She was no Lady Regina, who had nothing in her head but society prattle. "I am so glad that I am able to introduce you to the pleasure of theatergoing, given your passion for the art form."

“As am I,” she said.

Her smile was instinctive and happy; Fiennes was surprised by an emotion that felt close to affection. It wouldn't be difficult to be married to this lady. He would escort her to as many plays as she wished—when they happened to be in the city at the same time, of course.

Fulvia had turned back to the stage by the time he'd formulated that resolution.

“I do wish they would start.” She caught his sleeve. “Oh, is that large man the Prince Regent? Over there across from us?”

“Yes, that is the Royal Box. I see your father behind him.”

“I hope you don't mind that I didn't insist that the viscount escort my mother and myself,” Fulvia said, looking up at him. “My father's personality is august, and I wanted to meet you in quieter circumstances.”

“August” was one word for the viscount. Fiennes understood exactly what she meant, which boded well for their future together.

A blast of trumpets indicated the opening of the play. Fulvia drew in a breath and watched with shining eyes as the red velvet curtain swept apart. An elderly man strode onto the stage, followed by a fellow wearing a hat like a coal scuttle adorned with a feather.

When the first half was over, Fulvia turned to him and exclaimed, “It's a wonderful adaptation of *The Taming of the Shrew*, don't you think?”

Fiennes had no idea, never having read the original play. “The lady is somewhat aggressive,” he said cautiously.

“I agree that Kate should not have broken her lute over the music-master's head,” Fulvia said. “I don't care for Petruchio's hat. Do you think that the actor knows that his face cannot be seen from the boxes?”

“Probably not, since it's the first night,” Fiennes said.

“We must tell him,” Fulvia said decisively. “It could make a difference as to whether the production is judged a success. How can the Regent judge his acting without seeing his face?”

Fiennes had the distinct impression that His Majesty was far too busy entertaining the Birds of Paradise clustered in the Royal Box to bother with the play. “I suppose I could send a note to the director later.”

“No, I would prefer that you send a note immediately,” Fulvia stated. “Mr. Woodward must remove that absurd hat.”

His future wife had a remarkably determined chin. But after all, he didn't want a weak, simpering lady, did he? His mother had been equally decisive,

in her own way.

Fiennes dispatched his attendant backstage with an urgent message for the director, and then dedicated himself in the man's absence to making certain that the viscountess was offered delicate sandwiches and champagne. When he returned to Fulvia, she was frowning thoughtfully at the curtain, ignoring all the chattering nobility who would have absorbed Regina's attention. Fulvia didn't even seem to know that she was garnering admiring glances from all sides.

"What are you thinking about?" he asked.

"The play is somewhat uncouth," Fulvia said. "If I heard correctly, Petruchio called Catherine 'a lusty Wench,' and then expressed the wish to 'have a grapple with her.' I don't remember Shakespeare's play including that line."

Fiennes cleared his throat. "You have an excellent memory, if you're able to compare this production to the original script."

"I am able to repeat a sermon word for word," Fulvia said, shrugging. "It's not a very useful skill, is it? I did like the way Petruchio called her 'plain Kate, and bonny Kate, and the prettiest Kate in Christendom.' "

"Miss Foote is not as pretty as you are," Fiennes said.

He was used to young ladies blushing in confusion when he offered a compliment, but Fulvia didn't seem interested. She certainly wasn't vain.

"He also mentioned her 'bashful modesty,' yet I don't think Miss Foote acted modestly at all," Fulvia said. "The way she waggled her hips suggested the opposite. She ought to be uninterested in Petruchio at this point in the play. She thinks him a 'mad-cap ruffian.' "

Fiennes nodded. "I take your point."

"I gather that the Theater Royal's next performance is *King Lear*, and one has to assume that Miss Foote will play Cordelia. I shudder to think of Lear's beloved daughter in the hands of someone who looks and acts like a commoner!"

Having slept through *King Lear* in school, Fiennes tried to change the subject. "I wonder if you will spend much of your time in London once married?" he inquired.

"If Catherine planned to 'tame' Petruchio, she wouldn't be quite so inviting, would she?" Fulvia asked, ignoring his question.

"I expect not."

"I would never wish to tame a man," she announced.

“I’m grateful to hear it,” Fiennes said.

“I fully expect my husband to behave himself without any direction from me.”

“Excellent.”

“But why is Kate’s father insisting that they marry so quickly?”

“Likely for the same reason your father would like to complete our betrothal,” Fiennes suggested.

“My father—” She broke off. “I see. I hope you are not as desperate for my dowry as Master Petruchio is, Lord Peregrine.”

“No,” he said, amused. Fulvia seemed to have no idea of his wealth, which was refreshing.

Behind them, the door opened, likely the attendant returning. Fiennes turned and froze, barely stopping himself from scowling.

He would expect Viscount St. Trevelyon to pay a visit to the box, if only to inquire as to his wife’s comfort.

But Lady Regina?

What in the bloody hell was his former fiancée doing, prancing into his box as if she hadn’t discarded his ring in a glass of lemonade?

CHAPTER SIX

IN WHICH ELLA CROSSES SWORDS WITH HER COUSIN'S FIANCÉ

Ella was doing her best to enjoy the evening. After all, she might never again have the chance to attend a performance at the Royal Theater, let alone in its most lavish box—other than that containing royalty, of course.

The truth was, she was rattled.

Her cousin's future husband was ... well, he was so much *more* than she had imagined. Lord Peregrine wasn't anything like the debauched noblemen whom her uncle occasionally brought to the country, the men who clustered around the Prince Regent: They were indolent gamblers with lascivious eyes and soft waistlines.

Lord Peregrine's face was chiseled, his jaw hard, even his eyebrows forceful. His body was broad-shouldered and muscular, as commanding as his features.

The only thing about Lord Peregrine that reminded her of the Prince's cronies was his expression. When she first entered the box, his face looked intolerably insolent, even bored.

That was before he had caught sight of Fulvia, of course.

Ella wouldn't say that Lord Peregrine's expression matched that of Mr. Woodward at Mrs. Quimby's shop, but from where she sat, he certainly didn't look bored any longer. Whatever Fulvia was talking about held his entire attention.

Likely they were discussing plays. The viscount thought that his daughter's head was "as empty as a skull" only because he never bothered to talk to her. Fulvia devoured plays, reading every tome in the St. Trevelyan library over and over until the volumes were practically worn out.

Suddenly Ella realized why they were at the theater: This was the perfect place for Fulvia to demonstrate her intelligence, thereby fulfilling one of her father's promises to Lord Peregrine.

In fact, Ella was fast coming to the conclusion that Fulvia was far more intelligent than she had realized. In the last years, she'd been so harried by the needs of the household that she hadn't paid much attention to her cousin.

Looking at her now, playing a docile maiden, fluttering her eyelashes at her future husband?

Ella had underestimated her.

Her eyes strayed to Lord Peregrine again. All that masculinity was unexpectedly attractive. His jaw was shadowed with stubble, which her uncle would deplore.

She did not deplore it. Not at all.

"They look happy together, don't they?" the viscountess said, squeezing Ella's hand. "Oh, I do hope that the match goes through. It wasn't fair of your uncle to charge you with such enormous responsibility. He certainly wouldn't have bought such delightful garments for us. I just wish that your dear mother's—"

"Pray, do not thank me again," Ella said briskly. "The solicitors promised to buy back the diadem as soon as Fulvia marries. And just look, his lordship is eating out of her hand."

"I suppose," the viscountess said. "He doesn't seem to be an *easy* man, does he? I'm not surprised he broke off an earlier engagement. If you don't mind, Ella, I shall just rest my eyes. I do wish these plays didn't begin so late at night."

That said, she went straight to sleep. Not for the first time, Ella felt a tinge of fear that something was wrong with her aunt, owing to more than exposure to the London air, which the viscountess blamed for her exhaustion.

Lord Devin sat down beside her again, offering her a platter of cucumber sandwiches. "How do you like the play so far?" he asked. Lord Peregrine's friend had a cheerful, open face, and Ella quite liked him.

She had the feeling it was mutual, though that would never do. Lord Devin had already told her about his sisters. He could not marry a dowry-less girl like herself.

"I don't see much reason to rewrite Shakespeare," Ella confessed.

Just then the door behind them opened, and a young lady walked in, followed by her maid.

She was very pretty, tall, and slender, wearing an aqua-colored gown with adorable puffed sleeves trimmed with pearl pendants, which also adorned her bodice and continued down her gown to her slippers. Her lilac-colored taffeta

chapeau should have clashed with the blue-green dress, but instead it looked outrageously chic.

Devin muttered something that sounded like a curse.

“Who is that?” Ella asked, as he began to rise.

“Lady Regina Charlotte Haywood, sister of the Duke of Lennox,” Devin muttered.

Ella blinked. “Lord Peregrine’s fiancée?”

“*Former* fiancée.”

Lord Devin made his way to the door, bowing and kissing the lady’s hand. He was presumably giving his friend time to collect himself, but when Ella looked at Lord Peregrine, he showed no signs of being disconcerted.

And neither, of course, did Fulvia.

To the best of Ella’s knowledge, Fulvia had never experienced the slightest insecurity around beautiful women. Even in the cradle, she had been enchanting, her dimpled face framed by a cloud of flaxen curls. As a result, she had never experienced jealousy, being calmly confident of her own beauty. In fact, the only uncertainty Ella had ever seen on her face was the result of those yellowed satin ruffles.

Thankfully, Mrs. Quimby’s designs would not put Fulvia to shame. Her pale pink gown, covered in silver net, was simpler than Lady Regina’s gown, but equally charming.

Lord Peregrine glanced at the sleeping viscountess. Rather than disturb his future mother-in-law, he led Lady Regina directly to the front of the box. Lord Devin seated himself to the right of Fulvia and as Ella watched, Lady Regina slipped into the seat to the left, which had been previously occupied by Lord Peregrine.

Then she laughingly waved away her former fiancé.

What on earth was she up to? She shared an opera glass from her bag with Fulvia, beginning to point out all her acquaintances.

Fulvia asked a question, and Regina giggled. “Those are the fashionably impure,” she informed her in a carrying voice. “We pretend they don’t exist, which means that we pretend the Regent doesn’t exist, as his box is always thronged with light-heeled women!”

“I apologize for not introducing you to Lady Regina,” a deep voice said. Ella startled and looked up to find Lord Peregrine looming over her.

“I don’t mind,” she said feeling rather awkward.

“I do not wish to wake your aunt,” he said. “I thought we might stroll

about.”

Ella frowned at him. “Why?”

“Lady Regina is bent on offering entertainment to the audience. The entire place is occupied by deciding which of my purported fiancées is the more beautiful. My presence is only a distraction.”

His tone was sardonic, but Ella had to admit, he had cause. It was rather odd of Lady Regina to have visited their box, though she didn’t think Regina posed any challenge to Fulvia. Lord Peregrine’s expression suggested that he didn’t give a damn about his former fiancée’s motive.

“I would be happy to go for a stroll,” Ella said, rising. She tucked her aunt’s shawl around her shoulders and smiled at Lady Regina’s maid. “We’ll be back soon. Please do eat the sandwiches. My cousin rarely does more than nibble.”

“She’s akin to Lady Regina in that,” Lord Peregrine put in.

The girl’s face brightened. “Truly, Miss?”

“Absolutely. They’ll just go to waste.”

Ella walked out followed by Lord Peregrine, who closed the door behind them. He cleared his throat as they began walking down the stairs. “I beg your pardon, but I cannot remember your name.”

“Occasionally people forget their *own* names on meeting Fulvia,” she told him. “My name is Fenella St. Trevelyon, but given your agreement with my uncle, you may call me Ella. I’m Fulvia’s cousin.”

His eyes flickered at her smile. “So my astonishment at your cousin’s beauty is not a new phenomenon?” His voice was wry, which she rather liked.

“Gentlemen either go starchy and tight-lipped, or they look as if they’ve taken a blow to the head,” she said, deciding that she didn’t have to pretend to be docile, maidenly, and the rest, since he was marrying into the family. “I suppose that will change once she’s married.”

He appeared to be struck by that idea, so Ella kept talking.

“You mustn’t think that Fulvia is fast. She’s never shown much interest in the men who’ve fallen in love with her. Of course, we live deep in the country, so it’s rare to have a swain who is literate.”

“Something in my favor,” Lord Peregrine murmured.

“You’ve already declared victory by rights of owning a theater box,” Ella told him. “Do you have any idea how many people attend the Theater Royal in a single night?”

He shrugged. "One thousand? Three thousand?"

"I suggest you simulate enthusiasm when talking to Fulvia," Ella advised. "I still remember how excited she was when the Theater Royal reopened with *Hamlet* in 1812, after the fire. She demanded her father bring home newspaper accounts from London. He brought them to the country months after the fact, but she memorized every word."

"Thank you for the advice."

Ella didn't roll her eyes, but she did allow herself Unkind Thought #2 for the day. Fulvia was on the verge of marrying a moody, arrogant man who likely thought that his wife would pay attention to his emotions.

Her uncle had offered a great training ground for *that*. Lord Peregrine would quickly learn that his wife had no interest.

"Why are you smiling?" he asked now.

"Oh, nothing," Ella said airily. "So, what do you do?"

"What do I *do*?"

"During the day," she supplied. "Not that you have to do something, but I understand that even gentlemen occupy themselves. Certainly, my uncle spends a great deal of time at the racetrack, when not in attendance on the Prince Regent."

"Would you like a glass of champagne?" he asked, opening a door. "This private parlor is reserved for guests seated in the boxes."

"Yes, I would," Ella said bluntly. "Since I wasn't offered one earlier."

He frowned at her. "Miss Fulvia asked that my attendant be sent backstage with an urgent message."

Ella didn't point out that *he* had offered her aunt a beverage. Unfortunately, it was too late to suppress UT #3.

"Why do you keep smiling like that?" the gentleman said, taking a glass of champagne from a footman holding a tray and giving it to her.

"Like what?"

"As if you know a secret."

"Nonsense," Ella said. "I don't know any secrets—though perhaps I should, because in novels a poor relation is always hovering around the edges of the room and overhearing interesting secrets about lost wills."

"No lost wills in the St. Trevelyon household?"

He showed no surprise on learning she was a poor relation, which was somewhat irritating given that her gown was as lovely as Fulvia's, if not more so. Mrs. Quimby had called it "celestial blue, with gossamer net."

Ella had never looked better, not that she offered competition to Fulvia at the best of times. Her hair was the wrong color, and her chin was—to put it delicately—too strong. Plus, she had no dimples and likely a forbidding expression, thanks to frequent arguments with bill collectors.

“So,” Lord Peregrine continued, when she didn’t answer, “you haven’t heard any secrets worth putting in a novel?”

Ella sipped her champagne and shook her head. “None. Although there is a lost—”

She caught herself.

Lord Peregrine took a drink of champagne. His eyes were fixed on hers. There was something wildly attractive about the way he gave her his full attention. It made Ella feel silly and unlike herself. Like the kind of girl who would toss her head and giggle.

“What did you say?” he asked.

“Nothing important.” She edged away because he was so large, even when leaning against the wall.

“We can talk about the play if you prefer. But frankly, it’s a watered-down version of Shakespeare’s original, and we have to spend at least ten more minutes together.”

She raised an eyebrow. “Ten minutes?”

“A call to an acquaintance’s box lasts precisely twenty minutes,” he informed her. “Lady Regina will never abrogate social rules. Tell me about the lost will?” His eyes gleamed at her in the candlelight.

“How did you know there is a will?”

“The only other word that could follow ‘lost’ is heir. Has anyone gone missing lately?”

“I see why novelists lean on that plot device,” Ella observed. “You no longer look bored.”

His brows drew together.

“I apologize,” she said quickly. “That’s Unkind Thought #4 for the day. I promise to be extremely pleasant from now on.”

He repeated the phrase slowly.

“I allow myself only four UTs, or Unkind Thoughts, a day,” she explained. “You already know I’m the poor relation, but in case you have never imagined what that’s like—and believe me, you wouldn’t be alone—it is extremely easy to lurk at the side of a room thinking frightfully judgmental thoughts.”

He smiled faintly. "You judge me easily bored."

"I apologize if that is not the case," Ella said. "At times, faces do not reflect thoughts."

"In truth, I find social events boring," Lord Peregrine said, finishing his champagne.

He might as well have flatly said that *she* was boring. Ella managed not to flinch, but it was an effort. She found that her heart was beating quickly; she felt more alive than she had in ages.

But he was bored.

"Would you like another glass of champagne?" he asked, after a silence.

"I oughtn't to."

"Why not? I can't imagine that inebriation will make you less frank than you are already."

Ella choked with laughter. "That's put me in my place, hasn't it? So you think I'm rude, and I think you're perpetually bored and, given your evasion of my query about your daily activities, probably feckless as well. At this rate, we'll have to be seated at opposite ends of the table during Christmas lunch."

A footman popped up with a tray of champagne. Lord Peregrine handed one to Ella, their fingers brushing.

Her heart skipped a beat at his touch, which was embarrassing. Yet Lord Peregrine was the first eligible gentleman who had ever paid her attention. The fact that he was doing so only to avoid his former fiancée had to be acknowledged. It was a fact, just like his reaction to Fulvia's beauty was a fact.

"Let's return to the lost will," Lord Peregrine said, not bothering to counter her assessment of their future holidays.

She hesitated, but he was to be a family member. Besides, he did look interested. "My father made a will. I—and the butler who witnessed it—remember him writing out the document. It has never been found. It's irrelevant at this point."

"Would you be the heiress rather than Fulvia?"

She blinked. "I was under the impression that you had mountains of sovereigns and no need for a dowry."

"That is correct. But to clarify, had there been a large inheritance, you would have been the heiress. Since there's nothing to inherit, the will is irrelevant."

“More or less,” Ella admitted. “I didn’t surprise you with regards to our standing, did I? Fulvia *will* inherit two hundred acres in the north of England. If you put a modicum of money back into it, the land will repay you.”

Lord Peregrine took a swallow of wine. “I have no need for Fulvia’s acres.”

“Thank goodness,” Ella said, somewhat flustered. “I had the awful thought that perhaps my uncle had promised you stocks.”

“Ah yes, Fulvia’s dowry in stocks and bonds.”

Ella bit her lip. Lord Peregrine obviously knew there was no dowry; he was taunting her.

“Goodness, me, I think you just had Unkind Thought #5 for the day,” Lord Peregrine said, pure delight in his voice. That grin changed his face from sardonic to ...

Something else. Something devastatingly attractive.

Ella hastily took another sip of champagne. “We should return to the box.”

“Probably we have allowed all of London to compare my two fiancées.”

“Peas in a pod,” Ella said, giggling—realizing a moment too late that the champagne had gone to her head.

Lord Peregrine raised an eyebrow.

“You have marked requirements, don’t you?” Ella said cheerfully. “Golden hair, blue eyes, adorable chin, symmetrical features, slender—.” She caught herself just in time.

“Why stop there?” he asked, his gaze fixed on Ella’s face.

“Delightful figures,” she said, tossing her head.

“I fancy your cousin has the advantage,” he said laconically.

The laughter in his eyes was like a physical shock that jolted her body. Nothing but champagne could excuse what she said next. “Fulvia is indeed delightfully curved.”

“As opposed to flat as a gravestone,” her cousin’s future husband agreed.

Ella blinked, feeling abruptly sober. That was just the sort of nasty comment that her uncle tossed off on a regular basis, chiding his wife for being too plump. “Let me make sure I understand you,” she said slowly. “Did you just compare your former fiancée’s chest to a gravestone?”

His eyes were guarded. “Only in comparison to Fulvia’s curves.”

“Our conversation is inappropriate,” Ella observed, putting down her glass. “But since we have already abrogated civilized convention, I don’t mind telling you that your metaphor is coarse, Lord Peregrine. I think less of you

for it.”

“It was a saying of my father’s, and I ought not to have repeated it.”

It was just as well his lordship showed his real colors.

Her uncle would have relished that nasty comment. Luckily, Fulvia would be unmoved if her husband started tossing darts at her.

“Surely the interval is almost finished,” she said.

“I apologize,” Lord Peregrine said, rather stiffly. Perhaps Fulvia would be able to train him out of casual cruelty. He didn’t look as if apologies came easily to him.

“You needn’t apologize to me. My bosom wasn’t in question,” Ella said.

They both instinctively looked down.

Fulvia had a nice bosom for someone so slim. Ella was far more curvaceous, and Mrs. Quimby had fitted her bodice in such a way that no one could overlook that fact.

Lord Peregrine cleared his throat.

Ella looked away, knowing that heat was rising in her cheeks. She would die of mortification if he thought she was trying to steal her cousin’s fiancée by drawing attention to her breasts.

But as she climbed the stairs ahead of Lord Peregrine, returning to his box, her commonsense came to the rescue. The man liked a certain type of woman: take the two women to whom he had proposed marriage.

Neither of them was strawberry-haired, freckled, and overly frank.

Lord Peregrine paused in the shadowed corridor outside the door to his box. “I do apologize, Miss St. Trevelyon. My mother would have been appalled, and likely given me a sharp rap with her fan.”

“I accept your apology,” she said politely.

They were standing very close together, and he didn’t move. He smelled woody and green, as if he’d been in the fresh air. Ella’s instincts were ringing as loudly as the bell on a fire wagon dashing down the street.

Lord Peregrine was *disturbing*.

“I do not require blue eyes and gold hair in my bride,” he stated.

Perhaps she had made him feel shallow?

Ella grinned, enjoying that thought. “If not, then you have been remarkably lucky.”

She wasn’t quite certain, but did he steal a glance at her bosom?

“I have always considered myself so,” he stated.

CHAPTER SEVEN

A VERY SMALL WAND RESEMBLES A NEEDLE.

In the next two weeks, Fulvia became fast friends with Lady Regina, regardless of the fact that Regina used to be betrothed to Lord Peregrine. The lady made it clear to everyone that *she* had tossed his lordship's ring back, in contrast to the odious rumor that his lordship had rejected her.

Ella reserved judgment on that front.

She disliked the lady more and more every time they met. In her opinion, Lord Peregrine had had a lucky escape. Regina was *mean*, and Fulvia was so used to ignoring unkind remarks that she paid no attention to Regina's waspish commentary.

The first time Regina paid them a morning call, following the evening at the Theater Royal at Drury Lane, Ella had joined the family for tea, wearing an elegant morning gown. Regina had treated Ella as an equal, patting her hand and suggesting she avoid parsnips as they were known to have fattening effects on the bosom.

On her second visit, Regina advised Ella that the tea leaves must have been exposed to air, as its flavor was acrid. Five minutes later, she questioned whether Ella had properly trained the downstairs housemaid, as she detected a lingering odor of coaldust. The last straw was when Regina gave the viscountess—who despaired over her belly—a dietary recipe designed for older women that had the lady in tears after Regina left.

After a few such cheerful occasions, Ella suggested that the girls entertain each other, and her aunt gratefully agreed. Fulvia and Regina spent whole days together, chattering about everything from lip color to handsome actors. In the afternoon, they would drive off in Regina's phaeton to visit Hyde Park. One day they didn't return until six, because they had attended a matinee of *Catherine and Petruchio*, seated in Lord Peregrine's box, of course.

"You should have informed me," the viscountess said over dinner.

"You were lying down when we left," Fulvia said. "But I have the most

marvelous news, Mama. The actors playing Catherine and Petruchio at the Theater Royal have agreed to perform a scene from *Romeo and Juliet* at our ball.”

The viscount scowled and put down his glass of wine. “Nonsense!” he barked. “Balls don’t offer theatrical entertainment.”

“Mine shall,” Fulvia replied serenely. “*Catherine and Petruchio* is a sensation. Having the two lead actors perform for us will ensure that ‘Starry, Starry Night’ is the premiere ball of the entire Season.”

“Humph,” the viscount grumbled, clearly accepting her point. “How do you expect to pay for them?”

“Lady Regina and I summoned the two leads to Lord Peregrine’s box and simply asked them. No mention of payment was made. I am certain that anyone who has not seen the play will buy a ticket the day after my ball.”

Ella couldn’t help laughing. Fulvia had learned that trick at her father’s knee.

“Are you certain it’s a good idea for Fulvia and Regina to be so independent?” she asked her aunt later.

“Oh, definitely,” the viscountess said vaguely. “And in any case, Lady Regina is always accompanied by a maid. Dear, would you mind fetching me a wet cloth for my head?”

“I think we should summon a doctor,” Ella said. “You’re so tired these days.”

“Nonsense,” her aunt murmured, closing her eyes. “The truth is that I’m getting old, Ella. I’m going through the change of life.”

Oh. What did Ella know of that?

Nothing.

When the “Starry, Starry Night” ball was only a week away, Mrs. Quimby sent a message asking that they visit the Emporium to be fitted for their gowns.

Naturally, Regina accompanied them. Sometimes Ella felt as if Regina had become a fourth member of the household, something the lady explained as due to her brother’s revolting behavior with his new wife.

“They kiss in public, where anyone might see them,” Regina said with disdain. “A duke and duchess, behaving like commoners! It is repulsive. And my sister-in-law Beatrice?” She shuddered. “I cannot express my feelings. They are too painful.”

“May I introduce Lady Regina?” Fulvia said to Mrs. Quimby when they

arrived at the Emporium. “She is loyal to a French *modiste* on Turnball Street, but she has expressed much admiration of the garments you’ve made for me.”

Lady Regina greeted Mrs. Quimby by moving her chin slightly downward.

“It’s a pleasure,” the seamstress replied, looking unimpressed.

“I’ve never been fitted for a gown in a public establishment,” Regina said, looking about the room. “My *modiste* comes to me, of course.”

“Never mind that,” Fulvia exclaimed. “I forgot to ask whether you saw news that Theater Royal at Drury Lane has rejected Samuel Coleridge’s new play?” She sat down at the side of the room next to her mother, who was already resting comfortably with her feet on a stool.

“*Zapolya*,” Regina said scornfully. “What did Mr. Coleridge expect would happen after he gave the play that name? I hear it is nothing more than a hash of Shakespeare’s romances.”

Mrs. Quimby rolled her eyes at Ella and drew her into a dressing room.

Most days, Ella dressed hastily in a faded cambric cotton dress, running downstairs at dawn in order to give Cook access to the stillroom and the storeroom, the keys to which were kept on the housekeeper’s ring.

The gown hanging on the wall of Mrs. Quimby’s dressing room belonged to a different world than that of stillrooms and storerooms and housekeeper’s keys.

It had been sewn from clear blue silk that fell elegantly to the floor from a high waist. The wide trim around its low bodice was fashioned from white tulle embroidered with posies shaped from seed pearls and spangles. The narrow skirts fell to a padded hem that would flare slightly to dance around Ella’s ankles.

“It’s exquisite,” she breathed, leaning closer to look at the pearl trim. “You must have a true artisan working for you! This embroidery is dazzling.”

“I’d like to take credit, but I can’t,” Mrs. Quimby said, smiling. “I removed the trim from one of your mother’s gowns, my dear. I suspect it was made by French *modistes*. I think she would be happy that you will wear something of hers on the night you debut.”

Ella managed a wobbly smile. “I’m sure you’re right.”

Mrs. Quimby helped her to undress and then laced short stays over her chemise. Ella generally wore a corset that restrained her bosom, lacing in front so she could manage it herself. Mrs. Quimby’s stays were more comfortable, but they hoisted her bosom into the air.

“I’m not certain,” Ella said, straightening her shoulders. Her breasts seemed plumper than usual with the stays supporting them rather than confining them.

“The gown demands it,” Mrs. Quimby said firmly. “Arms up, my dear.”

A billow of sweet-smelling silk went over Ella’s head. She had bundled her hair into a hasty bun that morning, but Mrs. Quimby deftly piled it on top of her head, leaving a few curls brushing Ella’s shoulders. Finally, she produced a circlet of pearls.

“That isn’t mine,” Ella pointed out.

“It *is* yours,” Mrs. Quimby said. “I found this headpiece tucked in the corner of a trunk. Trust the nobility to forget such a valuable piece. I’d guess it’s worth at least three hundred pounds. Likely the trunks were packed to move to the country, and after your mother passed away, they were simply moved to the attics.”

“Undoubtedly,” Ella said, feeling a bolt of sadness. “My uncle sacked my mother’s maid and my own directly after the funeral.”

“That would explain it,” Mrs. Quimby said, her dry tone speaking for itself. “Now we’ll move to the platform so you can see yourself in the glass.”

Ella hesitated.

“You’re not worried about Lady Regina, are you?” Mrs. Quimby asked. “I had a young lady, Miss Perslet, crying her eyes out because that woman apparently said her rear end looked as puffy as a sheep’s tail. I pity her children.”

“Children?” Ella repeated, startled.

“The children Lady Regina will have some day,” Mrs. Quimby amended. She rearranged a curl and said, “You’re ready as you’ll ever be. Go stand in front of the glass so we can see you from all angles. Show Lady Regina how beautiful *you* are. That woman thinks she’s the only hen in the henhouse.”

“Must I?” Ella said, biting her lip.

While she successfully ignored most of Regina’s comments, one look at Ella in this gown would send Regina into fits of advice about the benefit of turnips and vinegar in slimming.

“Yes,” Mrs. Quimby said bluntly. “My seamstresses need to observe the gown from every angle, to see how it moves. We have to make certain you can run across a stage.”

“I’m not an actor,” Ella reminded her.

“You might still need to run. We also need to make certain the hem lands

just above your ankles. It seems a bit long.”

Thankfully, when Ella walked out of the dressing room, Fulvia and Regina were nowhere to be seen.

“How lovely you look, dear!” the viscountess exclaimed. She was sipping hot tea, her face a delicate shade of green. “Lord Peregrine took Fulvia and Lady Regina for a ride in his phaeton.”

“How on earth did he know to find us here?”

“Fulvia sent him a note this morning,” the viscountess said. “I have informed her that it is inappropriate to write to a gentleman, even one’s betrothed, but she says that I am old-fashioned.” She put down her tea and pressed her handkerchief to her lips.

“You must eat a rusk,” Mrs. Quimby said, bustling over. “I put it on your saucer for a reason, my lady. It will calm your stomach. Miss St. Trevelyan, please go to the platform before the mirror.”

Ella plucked up her skirts and stepped onto the low platform.

Mrs. Quimby folded her arms over her chest. “That gown is my finest yet,” she announced, a thread of deep satisfaction resounding in her voice.

Ella took a deep breath and looked at the mirror—and froze, unable to speak.

Looking back at her was ... her mother. Ella had inherited more than her mother’s rosy curls: she had her mother’s large eyes and strong chin. Her uncle had sold her parents’ portraits, and she had never realized how much she looked like her mother.

To the side of the room, her aunt clapped her hands and cried, “Your mother was a great beauty, Ella, and so are you!”

“An exaggeration, but I thank you for it,” Ella responded. She turned to Mrs. Quimby. “Please don’t think I’m ungrateful, but the ball is in Fulvia’s honor. Is her gown as beautiful as mine?”

“Absolutely. Your gown is made for a young lady with presence and dignity,” Mrs. Quimby said. “Your cousin’s gown is made for the belle of the ball, for a princess.”

Ella looked at herself again. She felt almost as if her mother were at her shoulder.

“The regularity of my daughter’s features is extremely pleasing,” the viscountess commented. “Yet there’s a sweetness around your eyes and mouth, Ella, that Fulvia will never achieve.”

“You will be the prettiest girl in the ballroom,” Mrs. Quimby said,

nodding. “Perhaps not the most beautiful, but the prettiest. Any man who has half a brain in his head will see it. Mind you, quite a few men are trundling along without any brains at all.”

“The marriageable gentlemen will all be at your feet. I don’t know what I’ll do without you,” Ella’s aunt said woefully. “Oh no, now I’m going to cry again. I’m frightfully mopish these days.”

Ella was about to run over and hug her aunt when the door opened and three people entered: Fulvia, followed by Lady Regina on Lord Peregrine’s arm.

Ella felt a stab of pure embarrassment. It was one thing to be seen by candlelight in a gown that skimmed her breasts, but in the broad daylight? She stayed where she was, head high, but it took all her willpower not to slap a hand over her bosom.

“You look so pretty, Ella!” Fulvia exclaimed, with distinct surprise in her voice.

Lord Peregrine didn’t move from the door, perhaps horrified—like Regina had been—to walk in on someone being fitted for new garments in public, rather than in their own bedchamber.

Lady Regina flicked a glance at Ella, raised an eyebrow, and then walked over to the viscountess. “How kind you are!” she said in carrying voice, as she sat down. “Few ladies would order such a striking garment for an orphaned niece.”

“Ella is more than my niece,” Lady St. Trevelyon responded, her tone noticeably cool. “She is another daughter to me.”

Regina patted her arm. “Kindness personified.”

“The hem is a perfect length, so you may descend from the platform,” Mrs. Quimby advised Ella.

“I cannot wait to see my gown!” Fulvia cried, disappearing into a dressing room.

All the while, Lord Peregrine stood by the door, his eyes fixed on Ella.

Why was he staring at her so? With a smile tugging the corner of his mouth? What happened to his customary derisive expression?

A thought occurred to Ella, making her feel even more embarrassed: perhaps he agreed with Regina, who was suggesting to her aunt that Ella’s gown sent the wrong message.

“Perhaps if Mrs. Quimby added a satin apron,” Regina was saying, her eyes sparkling maliciously. “I understand they are fashionable in Paris.”

Finally, Lord Peregrine moved from his place. He strode over to Ella and held out his hand. “May I assist you to descend?”

She took his hand and stepped down, knowing that her cheeks were rosy.

The sunlight pouring in the windows already made her breasts feel twice as large as when they were neatly confined by a corset and covered with faded cotton, not to mention the housekeeper’s chatelaine pinned to her front, dangling a thimble and pair of scissors.

“Good afternoon, Lord Peregrine.” She did not curtsy, because ...

Because ... *breasts*.

He bowed. “Good afternoon.” When he straightened, a few locks of hair fell onto his forehead.

Before she thought, Ella brushed them to the side. Her eyes widened at her own boldness. “Pardon me!” she whispered. Luckily, Regina was informing the viscountess about the benefit of cucumbers in a reducing diet, so she missed Ella’s faux pas.

“Your gown is beautiful,” Lord Peregrine stated.

Ella tried to keep her expression serene. It was a standard compliment that might be offered to any lady. He was Fulvia’s betrothed. “Mrs. Quimby has outdone herself.”

He quirked an eyebrow. “Perhaps a trifle more fabric at the top?”

She drew in a quick breath at the sting of his question, but it reminded her that he was a churl underneath all that manliness. Her uncle’s double, in a prettier package.

Among other things, Lord Peregrine certainly didn’t pad his calves. His silk stockings revealed a thick layer of muscle. The thought made her even crosser. Why had she ogled her cousin’s fiancé? She shouldn’t have even noticed that detail.

He cleared his throat. “I apologize.”

“There’s no need to apologize,” Lady Regina put in, coming up beside him and wrapping her hand around his arm. “We all agree with you, Lord Peregrine. Mrs. Quimby is used to designing for the stage, and certainly Miss Ella’s bosom would be visible from the farthest corner. Even, perhaps, from the moon. We in polite society do not expose ourselves in such a graceless fashion.”

Ella silently counted to ten, not allowing herself to speak.

“My fashion advice surely earned me an Unkind Thought,” Lord Peregrine said to Ella, stepping away from Regina’s grasp without even glancing at his

former fiancée. “Do I see in your expression that you are already at UT #2?”

“ ‘UT’?” Regina asked in confusion.

Lord Peregrine’s glance at his former fiancée was so chilly that Ella blinked. “A private jest.”

Regina curled her lips into a girlish smile. “How kind of you to offer advice to your betrothed’s cousin.” She turned to Ella. “I suggest you heed his lordship’s rebuke. It is difficult to navigate society when you’re used to back rooms. Fulvia tells me that you sleep in the attic?”

Lord Peregrine made an abrupt movement, but Ella caught his gaze, commanding silence. He narrowed his eyes in return but held his tongue.

“It’s not like that,” her aunt cried at the side of the room, jumping to her feet. “Ella is my dearest niece. She *chose* to live in the attic rather than in her former bedchamber.”

“Of course, she did,” Regina said. She turned back to Ella. “A ‘fichu’ is a length of fabric, sometimes made of lace. Lace is quite expensive, so you likely couldn’t afford that unless Mrs. Quill had a discarded piece on hand. Perhaps a second-hand piece.”

“Mrs. *Quimby*,” Ella said. “Not Quill.”

Regina ignored that. “You should cover your cleavage so that you don’t startle guests at Fulvia’s debut ball. You certainly don’t want people talking about you rather than her, do you?”

“I know what a fichu is,” Ella said, baring her teeth at Regina in something that resembled a smile. “How grateful I am to receive advice from a leader of the Ton.”

Regina’s eyelids flickered as she tried to parse whether there was a hidden insult in Ella’s comment or not.

“My niece looks beautiful in the gown as it is,” the viscountess said, her voice wavering. “You are the very image of your mother, dear. I was so jealous of her figure.” She put a hand up to her head. “Oh no, I stood too quickly!”

Lord Peregrine instantly pivoted, took one long stride, and caught her arm as she wobbled in place.

Mrs. Quimby ran out of the dressing room, trailed by Fulvia, still wearing her own clothing.

“Escort her ladyship to a chair,” Mrs. Quimby instructed Lord Peregrine, snatching up a fan and fanning the viscountess. “You must pay attention to your health at this delicate time,” the older woman scolded.

Lord Peregrine helped the viscountess to a chair and promptly retreated to the far side of the room.

“I am fine,” Ella’s aunt said. “My head spun, but only for a moment.”

Ella sat down beside her, holding her aunt’s hand. “We should summon a doctor.”

“The change of life is nothing unusual,” the viscountess said wearily. “I simply have to survive it.”

“The change of life?” Mrs. Quimby squawked with laughter. “Now who’s put that idea into your head? Nonsense. You’ll not be having the change for years to come—what you *will* be having is a baby!”

CHAPTER EIGHT

JUST WHAT ARE LADY REGINA'S INTENTIONS?

In the tumult that followed the viscountess collapsing sideways into Ella's arms in a dead faint, Fulvia hovered to one side while Lord Peregrine sent a groom to fetch a bier.

Then Ella's aunt opened her eyes with a start and cried, "You must be incorrect. That's impossible!"

"I think it's wonderful," Fulvia said soothingly. "I shall be very happy not to be an only child."

"It's marvelous," Ella agreed, dismissing her surprise that her aunt and uncle were still engaging in marital intimacies. If she'd given it any thought, she would have imagined their interactions were limited to the viscount's brawling monologues.

"It's not unheard of for a present to come along in later years," Mrs. Quimby said cheerfully. "You know, twins are more common in women of a certain age."

"A lesson for us all," Lady Regina murmured, her expression making it clear that she was revolted to contemplate an older woman engaging in the activities that led to children.

Ella glanced up at Lord Peregrine, who obediently stepped forward and offered an arm to Regina. "Shall we take a brief promenade, Lady Regina? The viscountess obviously needs a moment to absorb this marvelous news."

"Certainly, Lord Peregrine," Regina said with a syrupy smile. "I'll just fetch my pelisse."

His mouth a sardonic twist, Lord Peregrine bent down and said in Ella's ear, "You owe me. I'm up to *UT* #15. At least."

Ella couldn't stop herself from smiling. "Only 15?"

He blinked and straightened.

"Whereas I have had *KT* #1 for the day," she told him.

"Kind thought?" he mouthed. And at her nod, "Only the first of the day?"

Tsk, tsk. I am shocked by the younger generation's sour attitude."

"I had no idea you were so old," Ella said. "How lucky that your physiology doesn't reveal your antiquated status."

"I am ready, Lord Peregrine," Regina said, appearing at his side.

"Father will be overjoyed," Fulvia told her mother, as Lord Peregrine escorted Regina out the door.

Ella was shocked to see panic and despair in her aunt's eyes. Had she planned to leave her husband once Fulvia married? If a man howled at Ella night and day, she would certainly flee.

Alas, that would be out of the question with a new baby, particularly if the child was male and heir to the title.

No wonder her aunt's eyes showed stark desolation. "I'd like to go home," she said in a trembling voice. "Mrs. Quimby, I would be grateful if your seamstresses could come to the house tomorrow and fit my ballgown. You may deliver Ella's at the same time."

"I should be happy to, my lady."

"Please let Lady Regina know that we left," Fulvia said to Mrs. Quimby. "I'm sure Lord Peregrine will happily escort her home."

"Fulvia, I would prefer that you wait here until your fiancé returns," the viscountess said. "Mrs. Quimby can take the opportunity to fit your gown. I don't care for Lady Regina. I suspect she's trying to get Lord Peregrine back, to put it vulgarly."

"Nonsense," Fulvia protested. "Regina abhors Lord Peregrine. She's spent considerable time trying to talk me out of marrying him. Regina is going to marry an earl."

"Which one?" her mother inquired.

"The Earl of Eagleton." Fulvia shrugged. "Apparently, he's a fortune hunter, but Regina has a huge dowry. She hasn't told him yet."

Ella didn't let herself snort.

"I think she wants Lord Peregrine and his fortune," the viscountess said.

"You will be well enough for my ball, won't you, Mother?" Fulvia asked.

Fulvia didn't mean to be thoughtless, and she did care for her mother, but she was single-minded. Selfish might be another way to describe it.

And there it was, Unkind Thought #6, at least.

"Your mother will be fine," Mrs. Quimby said stoutly. "I tucked some ginger tea into your reticule, your ladyship. I'd suggest you put away those boned corsets. They won't do you or the babe any good. I'll bring over some

stays designed for an enlarging belly.”

Ella’s aunt visibly shuddered. “Fulvia, please ask Lady Regina to say nothing of my delicate condition.”

“Certainly, Mother,” Fulvia chirped.

“Neither of you are to breathe a word to the viscount,” her mother added, suddenly looking quite fierce for such a biddable lady. “I shall tell my husband in my own time.”

“Of course,” Ella said, and elbowed Fulvia.

“I gather you haven’t noticed, but neither I nor Ella address my father unless forced to do so,” Fulvia said bluntly.

“Miss Ella, I’ll help you remove your ballgown,” Mrs. Quimby said hastily.

“Don’t you listen to Lord Peregrine when it comes to the bodice,” Mrs. Quimby said, once they were in the dressing room. “That gentleman doesn’t want his friends to admire you as much as he does.”

“Lord Peregrine is betrothed to Fulvia,” Ella reminded her.

Mrs. Quimby snorted. “There’s many a slip between the cup and the lip. I recall the gossip columns going on about his betrothal to Lady Regina last year. I’d say your aunt is right about her ambitions to take Lord Peregrine back. The way she looks at him is as avaricious as a miser at Sunday collection.”

Ella suddenly remembered Lord Peregrine’s nasty comparison of Regina’s bosom to a gravestone. Perhaps that explained why Regina seemed so outraged by Ella’s low-cut bodice.

“Are you certain that I shouldn’t wear a corset, one that might disguise my bosom?” she asked, trying to quell another flicker of nervousness.

“Absolutely not! You are irresistible, but it’s not just your breasts. It’s the whole of you, from your hair to your face to your figure. Lord Peregrine won’t be the only man standing stock still, as if he’d been pole-axed. Your aunt is right. I wouldn’t want Lord Peregrine to go traipsing off with Lady Regina. I wouldn’t put it past that lady to compromise him.”

Ella felt a stab of uneasiness. Why *had* Regina made such good friends with Fulvia? Perhaps she did have ulterior motives. Perhaps Regina planned to seduce him into another proposal.

It would be horrible to live with the knowledge that one had had a chance to marry a man like him, but had let it pass. He was irresistible. Ella considered herself invulnerable to cajoling gentlemen, but she kept finding

herself smiling at Peregrine as if he were a friend.

Of course, as family, they could be friends. She tried to imagine Sunday dinners, with his lordship at one end of the table and Fulvia at the other.

With an abrupt clench in her gut, Ella realized that she would have to hide in the attic during those dinners. Or be elsewhere, at a table of her own.

Fulvia was right.

Ella had to marry, be he a grocer or a duke.

She needed to find a husband before she saw Fulvia holding a baby with a shock of Lord Peregrine's dark hair.

CHAPTER NINE

LORD PEREGRINE'S INDECISION ... AND A DECISION

Fiennes escorted Lady Regina and Fulvia to his phaeton and sat silently while they chattered about Thomas Woodward and his upcoming role in *King Lear*. In a triumph of self-control, he managed not to snort, thinking of that pretty coxcomb playing an ancient, raging king.

Eyes fixed sightlessly on his coachman, he took a deep breath.

Damn it. At this rate, he would be notorious for breaking engagements.

Except he wouldn't break the next: the final one, to the woman he chose himself.

Ella was a nobleman's daughter, so his father's dying wish would be fulfilled, which was all to the good. Yet if Ella was a butcher's daughter, he would marry her anyway.

But she wasn't: she was the child of a viscount—*living in an attic*.

It was everything he could do not to rip into the viscountess when he heard that. Beside him, Regina was treating Fulvia to a detailed description of the theater at Carlton House, where the Prince Regent had made his home.

"Of course, you're unlikely to be invited since your mother has not listed you for one of the Queen's Drawing Rooms," she said pityingly.

That was Regina: even her most casual observation was designed to wound.

Remarkably, Fulvia didn't appear to notice. "We'll have to do something about that. I must attend one of the Drawing Rooms," she said serenely.

Fiennes's life had changed when he walked through the door of the Emporium. It wasn't because Miss Fenella St. Trevelyon was exquisite, though she was. He'd never seen her in the sunlight before, only in a shadowy theater. Her red hair and creamy skin had been etched into his memory, along with her stubborn chin and—God forgive him—magnificent breasts.

His fingers itched to touch her, caress her, tantalize her. He wanted to spend long afternoons rolling on a bed with her, kissing her whenever they started arguing. Or no, perhaps after arguing, since she would never allow herself to be silenced by a kiss.

But it wasn't only desire that had changed Fiennes so much.

His life changed when their eyes met, and *he could read the emotion in hers*. Ella had felt anxious about the gown, about the bodice. He had answered too quickly, said the wrong thing, but he could learn. The important thing was that he knew what she was feeling.

He knew when she became furious too. He'd never been able to read a woman's eyes before, though perhaps he'd never cared to.

Later, when she had silently told him to *get bloody Regina out of the room*, he caught the command. Without words.

His chest felt tight, as if the air he drew in was heated. He had never imagined something like this happening to him.

As they arrived at the St. Trevelyon townhouse, Regina bade goodbye to Fulvia, clearly assuming that Fiennes would escort her home. But he wanted to see Ella.

Besides, why remain in close quarters with a cobra if one needn't?

He jumped out to assist Fulvia from the carriage, remarking, "Politeness demands that I inquire about the viscountess's health." He glanced up at his coachman. "Please bring Lady Regina to her home. You can return for me here." He bowed. "Good afternoon, Lady Regina."

Without looking at the undoubtedly enraged lady, he closed the carriage door and escorted Fulvia up the steps to the St. Trevelyon townhouse. In the back of his mind, he began running through scenarios that might drive to Fulvia to drop the betrothal.

It had been easy to infuriate Regina into throwing back his ring, but unfortunately, Fulvia was so disengaged that he couldn't imagine her in a passion. Perhaps if he announced that he had taken a dislike to theater, or if he gave up his box at the Theater Royal. That might do it.

On the other hand, no betrothal papers had been signed. Only a gentleman's promise stood between him and a proposal to Ella.

To hell with being a gentleman.

Once in the drawing room, Fulvia traipsed over to her mother and Ella, who were seated beside each other. "We must be presented to the Queen," she announced, sitting down without a greeting.

The viscountess looked aghast.

“How are you feeling, Lady St. Trevelyon?” Fiennes asked, after bowing.

“Better,” she responded with a sigh. “It’s a shock, of course.”

“I wonder if I could prevail upon Miss Ella to introduce me to her squirrel?” Fiennes asked. “I am thinking of acquiring one for my nephew as a pet, and I should like to know more about their sleeping and feeding habits.”

Ella cast him a sideways glance. Hopefully, she didn’t know that he had no nephew.

“Ella, do please bring the animal down to meet his lordship,” her aunt said. “I believe that I shall retire to my bedchamber. Fulvia dear, I am not enthusiastic about a presentation to the Queen, but perhaps if you escort me upstairs you can persuade me.”

Fulvia drew her mother to her feet, and giving Fiennes a careless nod, walked toward the door, chattering.

He certainly didn’t have to worry that her heart was engaged, any more than Regina’s had been. In fact, Fiennes had a shrewd notion that Fulvia’s heart would never be engaged. He couldn’t imagine her with a child, for one thing.

He’d never given the question of children any thought, but now he realized that he hoped his children’s mother would look at them with love—and anxiety, if they fainted, for example.

Fulvia had been patently annoyed by her mother’s lightheadedness, even though she had dutifully patted her hand.

But Ella?

Ella’s fearful expression when her aunt fainted had caught his heart. He wanted to comfort her, to pull her into his arms and hug her. More: her love for the viscountess made him feel greedy. He wanted that for himself and his children.

If he and Ella were married, and she told him she was carrying a child, he would have been overjoyed at news that her aunt didn’t seem to welcome.

Yet Ella had no father to whom he could apply for her hand. He couldn’t buy her, as he essentially did Fulvia.

She was her own woman. He had to win her.

Unfortunately, he was quasi-betrothed to her cousin and even worse, Ella wasn’t impressed by him. Pure disgust had crossed her eyes back in the theater, when he’d stupidly repeated his father’s jest comparing a woman’s chest to a gravestone. It had just hurdled out of his mouth, doubtless the

result of hearing hundreds of such comments.

As the viscountess and Fulvia left the room, Ella stood up. “What on earth are you doing asking to meet my squirrel?”

He tried for an innocent expression. “Squirrels are a popular pet for boys.”

Ella narrowed her eyes at him. Apparently, she could guess he was lying.

“All right, I don’t have any siblings, so no nephew. But I would truly like to meet your squirrel,” he added.

“Unfortunately, my aunt has forgotten that my uncle absolutely forbade me to bring Joe downstairs.”

“Why?”

“Joe is an amiable fellow, but he took a dislike to my uncle and bit his hand. So you see, I cannot bring him down, and you cannot come up to the attic.”

Fiennes felt another stab of anger. He couldn’t wait to have an abrasive talk with the viscount who had stowed his niece in the attic like an unwanted trunk.

“You can trust me.” He surprised himself: his voice dropped into a lower register, and the sentence sounded like a vow.

She eyed him.

“I would truly like to meet Joe, and I promise not to mar your reputation or person in any way, if you will allow me to visit your attic.”

Ella sighed, but seemed to accept what Fiennes had inadvertently confessed. Not only would he never hurt her in any way, but from now on, he would worry about her. He had never worried about anyone in his entire life.

But then, he’d never met a brave, funny lass living in the attic and—unless he was much mistaken—working as a housekeeper in the same household where she was once the treasured daughter.

“I suppose I could take you for a brief visit. Would you mind going through the servants’ quarters? If you cannot lower yourself to ascend the rear staircase, you’ll have to give up your unlikely desire to meet my squirrel.”

Fiennes told himself to stop looking at the way Ella’s mouth formed a perfect bow on top. “I am happy to climb the back stairs.”

“New experiences are good for you.”

Joy bubbled up from his gut in a most unnerving fashion, so he followed her out of the drawing room without a word, enjoying the sight of the pale soft skin visible at her neckline. In a perfect world, he would allow his hand

to settle on her back and then slide up to caress her neck. Nuzzle it. Nibble her ear and slide to her mouth.

Fiennes's hand actually twitched at his side before he stopped himself. Ella scarcely knew him, other than as her cousin's fiancé. Whatever bolt of lightning had fried his brains presumably had left hers untouched.

He had never before bothered with courtship. He had spent most of his time in polite society fending off ladies who found his fortune attractive.

Ella showed no signs of being one of them. Emphatically not.

Which led to the question: what could he offer her?

The ability to read his eyes? A husband who could read hers?

He knew instinctively that she preferred directness. Truth. She ought to know that he would never marry Fulvia.

"Did your insinuation that I had never trod a rear staircase count as an Unkind Thought?" he asked, as they started up the final, narrow flight of stairs.

"One of many," Ella said, tossing him a rueful look over his shoulder. "It's been quite a day."

"You might need to allow yourself more than four Unkind Thoughts in the future."

Ella pushed open a warped door that didn't even have a latch.

Fiennes felt a bolt of homicidal rage and caught back an expletive. The viscount was a blackguard. Fiennes had judged him a conniving fool, but now he wondered if the man wasn't worse. There was something deliberate about the way Ella had been left banished and unprotected. Something ugly.

"Oh? Why?" she asked. "Please close the door after you. I don't want Joe to escape."

"I seem to annoy you."

He stooped to pass through the doorway, its lintel threatening to knock him unconscious. The attic wasn't as bad as he had imagined. Windows spilled light onto battered, golden wood planks.

Over to one side, a snowy white bed was piled with pillows. Beside it was a table covered with towering stacks of books. A small gray cat was sleeping on the bed; she raised her head, blinked at them, and curled up into a tighter circle.

A scrabble of claws announced Ella's squirrel. The little animal threw himself across the floor, tripped over her slipper, and rolled onto his back. Ella picked him up, whispering an endearment, and tucked him on her

shoulder. His fur was red, darker than Ella's, but his bright eyes were vivid and intelligent, like hers.

“So you agree with me that Sunday dinners in the future might be awkward?” she asked, giving him a wry smile.

“Sunday dinners, but there's also Monday breakfasts, and Tuesday luncheons, and picnics by the river.”

Her forehead pleated. “What on earth are you talking about?”

“Marriage,” Fiennes said, leaning back against the closed door. “Marriage to me, Ella.”

CHAPTER TEN

A SHOE—OR A CANDIED VIOLET?

Lord Peregrine had lost his mind.

Ella was so startled that her mouth fell open.

“It must have been the gown,” she said, finally.

“What?”

“I can only assume that you were blindsided by my gown.” *Or my breasts,* she thought.

He snorted. “No.”

“I see no reason for disbelief. The only thing that changed between this meeting and our last was that you saw me in Mrs. Quimby’s ballgown.”

He leaned back against the attic door and favored her with a lazy, strangely sweet grin. He didn’t look overcome by lust; she wasn’t sure how to interpret his expression. “The gown certainly was a revelation.”

Ella shook her head. “I know that men make fools of themselves over women’s figures, but how can you allow a plump bosom to fog your logical thought?” She blinked. “I shouldn’t have said that! Shall we just agree to forget everything you just said, because it was stark raving mad?”

His smile deepened. “Mad, am I?”

“As a wet cat,” she confirmed.

His gaze made her feel edgy. Desire and laughter flickered in his eyes. “As a March hare,” she added firmly. “Better if we forget what you just said because—in case you’ve forgotten—you are betrothed to my cousin Fulvia.”

Lord Peregrine shook his head. “No, I’m not.”

“Yes, you are,” she retorted.

Joe chattered at her, wanting attention, so she caressed his angular little head with one finger, all the while keeping her eyes on Lord Peregrine. She felt as if she’d walked into a fairy tale, one in which the prince goes mad and chases a woman around the kingdom waving a shoe.

Amusement shone in his eyes, which sent a stab of fury down her legs.

“Do you have any idea how important Fulvia’s engagement is to my family?” she snapped. “Your betrothal is not a jest for your amusement.”

His eyes went blank. “I agree.”

“My uncle is not a provident man. We have staked everything on your proposal of marriage. Why do you think that I was fitted for a ballgown in a costume emporium, rather than by a French *modiste*?”

“I understand.”

“Every extra ha’penny is going toward Fulvia’s ball, which is designed to convince *you* that she will be an excellent consort.”

“‘Consort?’ I am no monarch.”

“You might as well be to a family that has lived in the country most of our lives as life in London is far too expensive to even contemplate.”

“I have made no promise to marry your cousin.” His voice rasped.

“You have, in so many words,” Ella insisted. “My aunt and uncle are depending on you.”

“Generally speaking, a bride brings a dowry to her husband,” Lord Peregrine pointed out, straightening up and taking a step toward her

“Please tell me you didn’t believe my uncle’s promise of a dowry.” Ella felt her stomach bubbling with something that might be excitement or nerves, as he came closer still. “He said that you promised to make a settlement.”

“Your uncle is a rogue, at best.”

She nodded calmly. “An unfortunate truth.”

“I want to marry *you*, not Fulvia.”

“Don’t be silly. I have nothing.”

Joe complained again, and she turned her head to kiss him. “Except for a squirrel.” Realizing that Starlight had woken up and was now winding her way around Lord Peregrine’s feet, she added, “And a cat.”

He glanced down at the kitty and then back at her. “As your uncle knew, I don’t need a dowry. What I do need, very unexpectedly and completely without forethought, is you.”

Lord Peregrine took a final step that put him a hair’s breadth away from her. Starlight stalked away, albeit with a three-legged tilt, disgusted by being ignored.

“Was that a proposal?” she enquired. “If so, my answer is no.”

Humor lurked in the curve of his mouth. “I see. Perhaps I can persuade you at another time. Do you think that Joe will allow me to hold him?”

Ella took a deep breath. “We’ll pretend this never happened,” she

instructed him, stepping away. She lifted Joe into her cupped hand. “I’m not sure he’ll go to you. He’s only known—”

Her voice broke off. Joe had leapt straight onto Lord Peregrine’s large hand. The squirrel cocked his head and purred.

Lord Peregrine met Ella’s eyes. “He’s warning me, isn’t he?”

“How did you know that?” Ella asked. “I thought at first purring meant he was happy, but he only seems to purr when he’s warning of danger.”

“Joe reminds me of you,” his lordship said.

“Red hair,” Ella said, resigned. “That’s what my aunt said, too.”

“Curiosity and—I suspect—a temper?”

Joe took another leap and landed on his shoulder.

“You have passed muster and are judged safe,” Ella remarked. “One of our footmen has tried to bribe him to sit on his shoulder, but with no luck.”

As she watched, Joe pranced around his lordship’s broad back and appeared on the other side, whisking his fluffy tail flirtatiously. “Lord Peregrine—”

“Fiennes,” he interrupted.

“That would be most improper.”

Joe chattered to Ella from his lordship’s shoulder. She stifled a grin.

“Your squirrel is a match-maker,” Lord Peregrine remarked.

“What do you mean?”

“He just issued an invitation,” he said, grinning at her. “Joe thinks you would be happy sitting on my shoulder or, in a human translation, in my arms.”

Ella had the strangest feeling, as if Lord Peregrine *saw* her. Since her parents died, everyone she met looked at her housekeeper’s keys or her faded dress, and though they treated her with courtesy—her cultured accent demanded respect—they didn’t see anything else.

They never saw her.

But this man did.

Lord Peregrine’s gaze reminded her of days long since passed, when her mother and father thought she was delightful and were curious about her thoughts.

Fulvia was rarely curious about anything outside the theater, and her aunt was warm but inattentive. The thought brought her back to herself.

“Now you’ve met Joe,” Ella said briskly, “it is time to return downstairs. If you are considering a squirrel as a pet, you should know that Joe can be very

destructive if bored.”

Lord Peregrine glanced about.

“I leave the window open, and Joe goes down the tree,” she explained. “He expends a great deal of energy collecting acorns so that we will have enough to eat when winter comes.”

Lord Peregrine reached up a hand to steady Joe on his shoulder and walked over to the window. “This isn’t safe. A man could climb up and harm you.”

“Don’t be ridiculous! That man would have to be as dexterous as Joe.”

He handed the squirrel back to her. “Why doesn’t your cat make a meal of him? Is it because she only has three legs?”

“Joe and Starlight are friends, actually. She infuriates him by stealing his acorns, but they never try to injure each other.” She set Joe down on the floor. “If he truly likes you, he will bring you an acorn.”

“A test,” Lord Peregrine said, his dark eyes on her face. “I don’t suppose you have a test you’d like to set?”

“What on earth are you talking about?”

“So I might prove myself,” he clarified. “Clean the Aegean stables or find a Phoenix nest.”

She gave him a lopsided smile. “You being in the garret does fall within the realm of fairy tales, doesn’t it? Except that this is real life, Lord Peregrine.”

He stepped closer again. “*Fiennes.*”

“You will be my cousin-in-law.”

“Never.”

She frowned at him.

“Whether you marry me or not, I shall never marry Fulvia.”

“But—”

“Before I met you, I thought it didn’t matter if I lived apart from my wife. I thought as long as she had her own interests—in Fulvia’s case, the theater—it wouldn’t matter if she took a lover, or I a mistress.”

Ella swallowed. It was nonsense, but the very idea of Lord Peregrine taking a mistress made her want to utter one of Joe’s piercing shrieks: the ones he saved for danger. Real danger.

“I don’t feel that way any longer.”

“You scarcely know me.”

“Absolutely true. I want to get to know you better. I believe you are a woman who would prefer to know my intentions. I intend to court you,

Fenella St. Trevelyon. So please call me Fiennes, and I shall call you Ella, as your aunt does.”

Every inch of him was an aristocrat. Regina had spitefully said once that Lord Peregrine was a boring dresser, always wearing black with touches of spotless white linen.

Ella couldn't imagine anything more elegant. He was so confident, wearing his beautifully tailored clothing like a suit of armor.

“I suppose I can call you Fiennes if we happen to be in private, but I'd rather you didn't court me,” she said, deciding to be frank. “I don't want to marry a man with the capacity for unkindness. My uncle ...” She hesitated.

His eyes had a furious gleam. “Has he done more to you, Ella, than lock you in the garret?”

“No, no,” she said hastily. “But his comments are routinely unpleasant. It's given me a dislike of your gender, to be honest. He says unkind, diminishing things to my aunt regularly. He expects her to simply accept them, and she does. I would not.”

He nodded. “I understand the power of an insult. My father insulted my mother, after which she retired to the country and never saw him again, not even on his deathbed.”

Ella narrowed her eyes. Was there a flicker of insecurity in his face? Impossible. “She sounds like a very decisive woman.”

“Yes, and stubborn as well. My father regularly insulted women. He thought those jests were particularly funny. Yet I think he was genuinely horrified when she overheard him.”

“I expect that's true.” In her mind's eye, Ella raised a glass to a woman who fought back, albeit dramatically.

“I must point out that it is not only men who are unkind. Lady Regina is well-versed in the art of cruelty.”

“Also true,” Ella replied. Reluctantly, she decided she had probably been wrong in thinking he was a version of her uncle.

The viscount would never, ever, speak so clearly or openly to a woman. Or to a man, for that matter.

A clattering sound caught their attention, and they both glanced down to find Joe trundling an accord across the floor.

“He is bringing you a present,” Ella explained. “He will expect you to give him something. It's an exchange, you see.”

“I'm afraid I don't have acorns. But I do have this.” He fished in his

pocket.

“Is that a candied violet?”

“Indeed. My favorite mare, Milly, loves candied violets. Like your squirrel, Milly loves me better when I come bearing gifts. I stole the violet from a teacake when I took Regina to tea on your instructions.”

“I do thank you for that,” Ella said. “My aunt needed to collect herself.”

His eyes crinkled at the corners, and Ella’s heart skipped a beat. “Milly is lucky to have a larcenous owner,” she said. “If you don’t mind giving it away, Joe would adore that sweet.”

Fiennes put the candied violet on the floor. Joe rolled the acorn to his feet and cautiously sniffed the violet before grabbing it in his mouth and bounding away. Fiennes watched him go, bending down to peer under the bed.

“Is the hatbox his bed?”

“Yes. He had been sleeping in a cardboard box on the mantelpiece until a week or so ago, when he started to collect bits of fabric, paper, and leaves. He’s making himself a bed. I think he’s growing up,” she said rather proudly.

Fiennes braced a hand on the bed and looked more closely. “So I see.”

“I found him as a baby. Joe was terribly thin and bedraggled, but he’s thriving now. Just look at his round tummy. I may have to limit his treats!”

“Hmmm.” He straightened.

“What?”

“You know how surprised the viscountess was to find that she’s with child?”

Ella nodded.

“Will you be similarly shocked by Joe’s condition—or perhaps we might rename her Josephina?”

CHAPTER ELEVEN

STARRY, STARRY NIGHT

STARRY, STARRY NIGHT

A BALL GIVEN BY THE VISCOUNT ST. TREVELYON IN HONOR OF HIS DAUGHTER'S DEBUT

FEATURING A COMMAND PERFORMANCE BY LONDON'S FOREMOST ACTOR, THOMAS WOODWARD, CURRENTLY STARRING AT THE THEATER ROYAL AT DRURY LANE

Ella was so busy in the week leading up to the ball that she scarcely slept. The sale of her mother's diamonds allowed Jarvis to rent a small forest of lemon trees and buy many cases of excellent champagne, as well as hire six footmen for the night.

An elegant supper would be supplied by Fortnum & Mason, an up-and-coming provider of luxury goods. Their household cook was excellent at stretching one duck to feed the family, but a ball for several hundred guests was far beyond her abilities.

"Miss, it's time for you to dress," Jarvis said, once they had safely overseen the arrival of flavored snowballs from Gunther's, nestled in blocks of ice that would keep them cool so they could be offered to guests after the performance of *Romeo and Juliet*.

"Keep an eye out for the actors," Ella told him, walking through the baize door into the front of the house. The entry was gleaming with lemon oil and smelled sweetly of flowers.

"If only the house could be like this all the time," the viscountess sighed, descending the stairs. Then she shrieked. "Ella! Go upstairs this minute! I sent my maid to the attic to dress you fifteen minutes ago."

When Ella returned downstairs in her magnificent ballgown, her aunt, uncle, and cousin were clustered in the foyer, waiting to receive guests.

The viscount was as elegantly clothed as his wife and daughter. With a lurch of her stomach, Ella saw that he must have talked a *modiste* into advancing him a new suit, likely citing the promise of his daughter's marriage to Lord Peregrine.

Or Fiennes, as he'd asked her to call him.

Fiennes's proposal—such as it was—felt like a dream. She hadn't seen him since.

He had escorted Fulvia and Regina to the theater to see *Catherine and Petruchio* yet again, but Fulvia said nothing about him the next day. Though Ella longed to inquire, she'd kept her mouth shut.

Perhaps his proposal had been an elaborate joke, though every instinct she had insisted that he was sincere. But if he was sincere, why did he escort Fulvia to the theater? Why was he still betrothed to her cousin?

"Humph," her uncle grumbled, looking at Ella from head to toe. "You seem to have inherited your mother's figure. My brother took one look at her, and turned as lusty as—"

"Husband," the viscountess said.

"Where did you find those pearls?" his lordship asked, his eyes sharpening.

"Mrs. Quimby supplied them," Ella informed him. "They are not real, of course."

"They look real," he observed.

"Fulvia, you look extraordinarily beautiful!" Ella exclaimed hastily.

Fulvia's gown was fashioned of pale crepe over peach satin, the whole of it sewn with spangles that dangled from bits of thread and caught the light. The deep hem was adorned with circlets of roses, as was the narrow bodice. Her puffed sleeves had rose-bud trim, and she wore roses in her hair.

"I fancy my daughter will be judged a diamond after this evening," the viscount said. He cast a sideways glance at Ella. "You might attract a suitor or two yourself."

"I certainly hope so," the viscountess said warmly. She looked better than she had the previous week. Putting away her restrictive corsets had restored color to her cheeks.

"You may join us in the receiving line," the viscount said with the air of a king bestowing largesse on the hoi polloi. "I would remind you, however,

that you are not here merely to dally with gentlemen. I expect the ball to go smoothly with excellent food, champagne constantly circulating, and no drunk musicians! If this ball isn't a success, I shall know at whose feet to place the blame!"

"I can't wait for the performance of *Romeo and Juliet*," Fulvia cried, ignoring her father's diatribe entirely. She was tweaking her long gloves. "Mr. Woodward is playing Romeo!"

The viscount twitched as if he were about to speak, but subsided. None of them shared Fulvia's passion for the theater—nor for Mr. Woodward, for that matter.

To Ella, who had now seen the play twice, the lead actor seemed like a pleasant lout, though it was clear he was desperately in love with her cousin.

On her second visit to the theater—seated in Lord Peregrine's box, but without its owner—Woodward had stolen endless glances at Fulvia, even when he was supposed to be "taming" his wife.

Jarvis opened the door, and the ball officially opened. When the butler beckoned an hour later, Ella immediately deserted the receiving line.

"At least a third of our guests did not appear on the invitation list," Jarvis said grimly. "I can only assume that his lordship freely invited people whom he encountered at his club."

Ella swallowed an unladylike curse. "Do we have enough champagne?"

"Perhaps. But not enough white soup, and Cook has no veal stock to make more. I'll take it off the menu."

A gentleman came up and slapped Jarvis on the back. "Austen! Won't you introduce—" His voice broke off as Jarvis turned and bowed.

"Excuse me, sir, but I believe you have mistaken me for someone else."

The man blinked and nodded. "Right you are."

"You do look magnificent in a morning coat," Ella said to Jarvis, after the man turned away. "I'm not at all surprised that you were mistaken for a guest from the rear."

"The gentleman must be inebriated," Jarvis stated. "The other problem I have encountered is that Juliet has not made an appearance."

Ella frowned. "Whom do you mean?"

"The young woman who is to play the role of Juliet," Jarvis amended. "Mr. Woodward has arrived. I am sorry to say that he has no sense of his place and has allowed himself to be drawn into conversation in the drawing room, but will not be, I fancy, so lost to propriety that he takes to the

dancefloor.”

“He has a great many admirers among the young ladies,” Ella said. Over the butler’s shoulder she saw Lady Regina and Lord Peregrine approaching.

“More importantly, Jarvis, do keep an eye on my aunt, won’t you?” she said urgently. “She already looks tired. She promised me that she would retire early if she grows winded or overly exhausted.”

“A last few housekeeping arrangements?” Lady Regina said coolly, arriving at Jarvis’s side. Her eyes lingered unpleasantly on Ella’s breasts.

Ella caught Lord Peregrine’s gaze, and what she saw in his eyes made her heart start beating heavily. As a consequence, she greeted Regina with a genuine smile. “Good evening, Lady Regina. Lord Peregrine.”

Regina moved her chin in an approximation of a nod.

Fiennes swept into a bow. “I was dismayed not to find you in the receiving line so that I could ask for the first waltz.”

Ella bit back another smile. He *had* been truthful. He was courting her, even before Lady Regina.

For her part, Regina looked strangely satisfied, excusing herself with a smirk as she walked away.

Ella didn’t have time to consider Regina’s expression; Fiennes took her arm and smiled down at her. “You look damned gorgeous,” he said, his voice low and rough.

Ella was startled into laughter. “That’s your civilized attempt at courtship, my lord?”

“I don’t feel civilized around you,” Fiennes said. “What made you so anxious while conversing with the butler? Strangely, he looks somewhat familiar to me.”

“People often mistake Jarvis for someone they know. He has that sort of face.” Ella let her hand tighten around Fiennes’s arm. It was so reassuringly muscled and bulky. “Apparently, my uncle encouraged a great many people who weren’t on our original invitation list to attend the ball.”

“How does your butler know who all these people are?” Fiennes murmured.

“Jarvis knows everything,” Ella said, uncaring. “We took white soup off the menu, but I am not entirely certain that I ordered enough delicacies or champagne. Oh, I could murder my uncle! We discussed the precise numbers that we could invite without seeming pitiable when the food ran out.”

“It’s only eight in the evening, and dinner won’t be served until eleven,”

Fiennes said. "Let's send for more."

"I don't have any more money," Ella whispered. "Besides, Fortnum & Mason will already be closed."

"My club won't be." Fiennes looked at one of the hired footmen, who sprang to his side. "I'm Lord Peregrine. Find my coach and tell my man to go to the Savoy and return with a late supper for fifty, and forty bottles of champagne." Coins clicked, and the footman bowed and ran away.

"You shouldn't have!" Ella protested. All the same, the anxiety that had gripped her faded away. She dropped his arm and frowned at him. "I do not wish to incur debt, as my uncle has done."

"I want to help." His eyes were concerned and caring, not an expression that Ella saw often. It went to her head like fine wine.

"I can pay you back," she said, trying to maintain her commonsense. She could sell her mother's pearl circlet, the one she was wearing at this very moment.

"Did you know that in some countries kisses *are* currency?"

She rolled her eyes at him. "In your imagination."

Fiennes leaned over so that his breath stirred her ringlets. She caught a whiff of starched linen and fragrant soap.

"My services come very cheap. One kiss would do per crate of champagne." His dark eyes glittered at her, the message unmistakable.

"Pooh," Ella said with an airiness that hid the fact that her heart was pounding and she could feel herself turning pink. "You are betrothed to my cousin," she reminded him.

"No."

"You took her to the theater this week!"

A grin spread across his face. "You noticed?"

"Of course I noticed," she said crossly.

"I am not toying with Fulvia's heart—in fact, I doubt she has one," Fiennes said bluntly. "But if your uncle becomes aware that I refuse to marry her, how will I be able to visit your house? I have to convince you to marry me before I break off the engagement."

"That's not a very kind thing to say about my cousin!"

"Truthful?"

Ella chose not to respond. It was true that Fulvia didn't give a pea for Fiennes, as far as she could tell. Without noticing, they had walked through the door of the drawing room. "I see what Jarvis means," she exclaimed.

“The room is already so crowded.”

“A huge success,” Fiennes observed. “Your cousin is the belle of the ball and will have any number of suitors to choose from. I doubt she will care that I am not one of them. Sadly, many gentlemen also seem interested in making your acquaintance.”

Ella’s eyes widened, because he was right. She could see gentlemen walking in their direction.

Fiennes leaned down and murmured in her ear. “Their interest is not merely due to your bosom, magnificent though it is.”

“Hush!” Ella cried, rapping him with the silk fan that matched her gown.

“Please give me the first waltz. Your uncle informed me that I shall take your cousin to supper. In the event of a meteor shower, I’d like to escort you to the garden.”

“The meteor shower won’t happen,” Ella told him. “You know how unreliable almanacs are. I merely needed a theme for the ball.”

A gentleman had reached their side.

“If the meteor shower occurs, *I* will escort you to the garden,” Fiennes said firmly. “Miss Ella St. Trevelyon, may I introduce you to the Honorable Barney Binlap?”

Barney had the guileless blue eyes and the downy hair of a newborn chick. Ella liked him immediately.

“My name is *Barnabus* Binlap, you arse,” he said, elbowing Fiennes. “We met in the receiving line. Please forgive me, Miss Ella, but this reprobate and I were at school together, so he takes liberties. I was known as Barney in the cradle. May I have this dance?”

“Good evening, Mr. Binlap. I would be happy to dance with you,” Ella said, giving the gentleman a beaming smile.

He blinked at her, and then cried, “Be still, my heart!”

Giggling, Ella allowed herself to be drawn away.

Sometime later, Fiennes bowed before her as the strains of the first waltz began. By then, Ella had danced with Lord Devin, with Barney again, as well with several other gentlemen, none of whom seemed to scorn her as a penniless housekeeper.

When the first waltz was called, Ella looked up—and there was Fiennes, waiting for her. She’d glimpsed him now and then earlier in the evening, his expression always noncommittal and disengaged.

Bored, really. He had been bored.

He didn't look bored when they moved into the lovely sweep of the music, his arm wrapped around her.

"You mustn't look at me like that!" she scolded, under her breath. "You are betrothed to Fulvia!"

"You know I'm not." His voice was raspy, and what she saw in his eyes made her duck her head. "I am praying for the meteor shower," he told her.

"I am praying for a Juliet," Ella told him. "Our actress has gone missing. I'm a little afraid that Fulvia will have hysterics if the performance has to be canceled."

He leaned in. "You'd consign me to marriage to a woman who has hysterics over Shakespeare?"

Ella found herself laughing. She felt a stab of emotion at his expression, as if something winged its way directly to her chest. "No ..." she whispered.

One side of his mouth quirked up. "Yes."

They were talking without words again.

Later, when guests flooded into the supper room, Ella looked about swiftly and breathed a sigh of relief. The small tables looked fresh and beautiful, bedecked with rented linens and clusters of posies. Jarvis had requisitioned extra tables from around the house so that even the uninvited guests could be seated.

The knee-high platform where *Romeo and Juliet* would take place was positioned directly before the table where Fiennes sat with Fulvia, the Duke and Duchess of Lennox, Lady Regina—and one Thomas Woodward.

Surely young ladies weren't supposed to sup with professional actors?

Her aunt had retired to bed an hour ago, and her uncle was nowhere to be seen. The viscount had insisted on turning the library into a gaming room, so likely he was to be found there.

"Where shall we sit?" Lord Devin asked.

Ella chose a table close to the door, where she could leap up to help Jarvis or the footmen if required.

"Do you think that Mr. Woodward's presence at the table with my cousin and Lady Regina will cause a scandal?" she asked Lord Devin. He had the sort of cheerful countenance that she instinctively trusted to tell her the truth.

"No, definitely not," he replied. "My grandmother would have been appalled, of course, but these days we're more welcoming. The Duke and Duchess of Lennox sitting with them changes the event. These days, actors are invited to dinner in the regular course of things. Amusing fellows, some

of them. Actresses ... well, that's a different kettle of fish."

"We aren't very sophisticated in the country," Ella explained.

"Nothing to worry about concerning your cousin," Lord Devin said cheerfully. "She'll have her pick of men this Season." He added with a mischievous twinkle, "Which is a good thing, since she's about to lose a fiancé."

"I have no idea what you're talking about," Ella said.

Fiennes walked by, pausing to set down a filled plate before Ella and leaving without a word.

Lord Devin broke out into a roar of laughter, but Ella ignored him, suddenly realizing that she hadn't eaten all day. All chatter in the room died down when Lady Regina suddenly rose and walked to the platform.

"What is she doing?" Ella asked in alarm.

"How unfortunate that your aunt and uncle have absented themselves," Lord Devin said. "You don't mind if I move my chair closer to you, do you? Lord Peregrine is an old friend, and I want to drive him into a frenzy."

"I do mind," Ella told him.

Lady Regina clapped her hands, and the room went silent. "In the absence of a Juliet," she said in a clear, carrying voice, "Miss Fulvia St. Trevelyan has kindly offered to play the role opposite Mr. Woodward, lead actor from the Theater Royal at Drury Lane. Please give a warm welcome to our performers."

There were a few gasps, and hesitant applause. Fulvia stood up and walked gracefully to the platform.

Fulvia accepted Mr. Woodward's hand and stepped up to the stage. He didn't join her, remaining on the floor level.

"*But soft! What light through yonder window breaks,*" the actor said, his eyes fixed on Fulvia's face. "*It is the east, and Juliet is the sun.*"

"Bloody hell," Lord Devin muttered. "Now *this* is a scandal."

"Really?" Ella asked.

"I was never any good at Shakespeare, but doesn't this scene end with a kiss?"

CHAPTER TWELVE

THE BURDEN OF BEING A GENTLEMAN

Watching his almost-wife play Juliet to an obviously lovestruck Romeo, Fiennes felt a wash of distinct gratitude to the universe for pushing Ella his way before he signed any betrothal papers with Fulvia.

As that thought registered, he turned his head and saw the deeply offended expressions worn by women at a nearby table. Bloody hell. With a sudden jolt of bone-deep horror, he realized that amateur theatricals at secluded country house parties were allowable, if risqué, but this?

Reciting love poetry to a *professional actor*, in a ballroom filled with London's most pompous matrons? Was Fulvia so naïve that she had no idea of the scandal she was causing?

His veins filling with ice, he realized that his fiancée was ruined.

Completely ruined.

A large dowry might have surmounted her imprudence, but no rational young gentleman would marry a penniless and scandalous bride, no matter how beautiful she was.

Obviously, Fulvia had no idea of the damage she'd done to her future. She had destroyed her reputation as quickly as a moth blunders into a flame. Though in fairness to her, she was only sixteen, and her parents were nowhere in sight.

It wasn't her fault.

Which meant that he'd have to go through with the betrothal.

A sick, hot sensation clenched his stomach. Everything in him fought the idea.

Yet people had been gossiping about his purported engagement since the moment Fulvia walked to the front of his box. In the weeks since, she'd been seen repeatedly in his company, which spoke for itself. He was her escort at this ball, her debut.

If he broke it off now, everyone would believe he jilted her due to her

performance of *Romeo and Juliet*.

Other men would be even less likely to woo her.

Out of the corner of one eye, he could see Ella sitting upright like a statue, surprise etched on her face.

Fulvia had obviously not shared her plans, but most likely, Ella wouldn't have had any idea of how devastating this imprudent action would be for Fulvia's reputation.

They had spent their lives in the country, after all. Neither of them understood how easy it was for a woman's reputation to be tarnished forever. Just look at the way that Ella had welcomed him to her bedchamber; if anyone had known, she would be branded a lightskirt at best.

From that moment, her identity as a "lady"—from the point of view of polite society—would have been lost.

Ella would have been banished.

Fulvia would *definitely* be banished. She hadn't been in London long enough to make allies, and her mother was nowhere to be seen.

Desperation gripped him. He *could not* marry Fulvia. Not feeling the way he did about Ella.

Yet how could he ever again call himself a gentleman if he didn't save a sixteen-year-old girl who'd strayed into disaster? He caught back a tortured groan at the thought.

Fulvia was still rattling off Shakespeare's verse. Even after their marriage, it would take a few years for the gossip to die down. The stuffiest of matrons would always consider her suspect.

"*Oh, gentle Romeo,*" Fulvia whispered, her voice soft but somehow clear enough to reach all corners of the room, "*If thou dost love, pronounce it faithfully.*"

Fiennes looked around again. A normal production of *Romeo and Juliet* wouldn't hush this audience. But Fulvia's passionate portrayal held every person in her grip.

Slowly, it dawned on him that the room was not silent merely because of the scandal.

"Damn," the Duke of Lennox breathed beside him. "She's good. Really good." His duchess was gazing at the platform, lips parted, utterly enthralled.

Fulvia was questioning Romeo now, chiding him for putting himself in danger. She was probably one of the best actresses Fiennes had seen in his entire life.

Fiennes *believed* her.

Her Juliet was independent, complicated, young, naïve, brash ... all at once. He found himself leaning forward, because ... Was Fulvia actually *blushing* as she offered to send Romeo a ring?

He'd never noticed that detail in the play before.

No woman had ever sent him a ring—it hardly needed to be said. Yet Juliet's offer made sense when Fulvia blurted it out, asking Romeo to marry her, going against every social rule, past and present, to do so.

Beside him, Regina made a scoffing noise.

He hadn't missed the suppressed air of triumph around his former fiancée when she announced Fulvia's role. With her years and knowledge of society, she had known perfectly well that Fulvia would put herself beyond the pale with this performance.

She met his eyes, a vindictive little smile curling her lips. "So sorry you'll have to break another betrothal," Regina mouthed.

Fiennes let his expression show revulsion, making her flinch before he looked away, dismissing her.

At the front of the room, the lovers wrapped up their plans.

When he was a boy, his father had sent him away to Eton at the early age of six, explaining that because he would inherit a title given in tribute to extraordinary wealth rather than blue blood, Fiennes had to go away and learn to be a gentleman.

After that, he was forced to stay away.

He was rarely allowed to come home, even for vacations, instead being sent to Jonah's or Devin's houses. He had loved his father fiercely and missed him. He even missed his morose mother. He had been lonely, surrounded by other families but never his own.

Yet if he remained glued to his seat when Fulvia wrapped up this scandalous performance, he would abnegate all the sacrifices his father made.

Because his father had loved him dearly, and had missed him.

No.

He *was* a gentleman, first and foremost—even if that title would lead to his sacrificing his future happiness, just as his father had sacrificed Fiennes's childhood happiness for the same goal.

As Fulvia said a last goodnight to Romeo, Fiennes came to his feet. Heads around the room swung toward him, their faces startled.

Regina tittered, likely thinking he was going to publicly repudiate his

scandalous fiancée.

Fiennes strode around the table, caught up Fulvia's hands and kissed them before turning to the room.

"I can think of no better way to conclude this magnificent performance than to announce that I consider myself the luckiest man in the British Isles. Lady Juliet has agreed to be my Lady Peregrine in the near future."

He flicked a glance at Thomas Woodward, and the actor slipped like smoke toward the exit from the dining room.

Fulvia turned pink and looked adorably confused. A cynical voice in the back of Fiennes's head queried whether she was now acting as a "young maiden," but then, she *was* young.

"Applause for the finest Juliet we've seen in many a day!" Devin shouted, jumping to his feet and clapping madly.

Fiennes glanced from face to face. Around the room, applause was first sporadic and then took hold. As if he were a puppet master wielding their strings, table after table jumped to their feet, applauding more and more loudly.

Fulvia stood beside him, smiling shyly, for all the world like a docile, sweet maiden.

Yet Fiennes had her measure now. His future wife was an *actress* through and through.

At the expression on Ella's face, a swell of frustration mixed with pure helplessness surged through his body. She was devastated. She hadn't agreed to marry him, but she had thought he had meant it.

He *had* meant it.

Now her face was pale. She was clapping, her lips pulled into a smile, but her eyes? He had prided himself on being able to read her eyes, hadn't he?

What he saw there was betrayal.

Desolation.

And shame.

Her expression made him sick.

He swallowed back a lump in his throat. There was nothing he could do. He was the fool who had heedlessly agreed to a betrothal with a woman he didn't know.

Breaking that engagement when the young lady in question had all of London at her feet was one thing.

He could never again consider himself a decent man if he deserted Fulvia

when she desperately needed him, even if she didn't realize she had been rescued by a knight in shining armor. Another way to put it: she needed a mere man to *be* a gentleman.

The Prince of Wales strolled through the door, accompanied by a group of drunk cronies. When informed that he had missed a Shakespeare performance, the Regent burst out laughing and insisted that the future Lady Peregrine would have to perform Juliet for him.

"Oh, I couldn't," Fulvia said, fluttering her eyelashes and looking thirteen years old. "I am far too shy for that."

She was an extraordinary liar, Fiennes registered.

He kept looking about for Ella, but she had left her table.

He would remove her from her uncle's household, of course.

Give her money. A house. Anything she wanted.

Anything except himself.

"Charming," the Prince of Wales said with a lusty chuckle, pinching Fulvia's chin. "Excellent choice for your bride, Peregrine."

Fiennes bowed. "Your Majesty." His head ached as if he'd taken a kick to the forehead.

"Everyone will be clamoring to come to your house parties in the summer," Devin commented after the prince trundled off to greet a friend. "Amateur theatricals are all the rage, but your Lady Peregrine will put productions on a different level." He lowered his voice. "I think she's gotten away with it, thanks to you."

Viscount St. Trevelyon had also missed the supper and the performance. Now he rushed through the door to greet His Majesty. His lordship was following the Regent and his chums out of the room—undoubtedly planning to escort them to the gaming tables—when he was caught by the circle of well-wishers surrounding Fiennes and his daughter.

A pert young matron asked how the betrothed couple met.

"My father met my fiancée some years ago and liked her immediately," Fiennes explained. He turned to Fulvia. "I believe that you spoke to him of chess."

"What?" Fulvia said, clearly startled. "Chess?" She flicked a look of rank dislike at her father. "I know nothing of chess," she told the circle. "The late Lord Peregrine surely met my cousin Ella."

Fiennes's face felt as if it hardened into wood.

"Nonsense," the viscount blustered, "you were such a wee tot that you

likely don't remember.”

So Fiennes's father had thought that his son should marry the *former* viscount's daughter: Ella. A thoughtful young girl who liked chess.

Curses smashed through his head. If only he hadn't believed the viscount when St. Trevelyon assured him that his late father had met Fulvia.

In his rush to finish with an unpleasant task—marry the noblewoman's daughter his father had supposedly identified—Fiennes had made a dreadful mistake.

One from which there was no going back.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

HEARTBREAK AND ITS AFTERMATH.

Ella waited until guests began drifting back to the ballroom or followed the Prince of Wales into the game room before she rose, making apologies to her supper companion, Lord Devin, and accepting a few more compliments on her cousin's extraordinary beauty, talent, and upcoming marriage to Lord Peregrine.

She had wrestled her emotions under control. She probably looked strained, but not tearful. Tired, but not brokenhearted.

What right had she to be brokenhearted, anyway?

In the last hour, she'd come to the chilling realization that she had been lucky not to have lost her virtue right there in the attic.

Everyone knew what happened to a maid when a gentleman entered her bedroom. Jarvis even gave new housemaids explicit instructions about screaming for help, emphasizing that inebriated male houseguests could be dangerous.

But Ella wondered about her uncle.

Men like him spoke with impunity and took what they wanted. Or at least, what they wanted at that moment. They would promise marriage within sight of a bed and change their minds afterwards.

Lord Peregrine being an example, obviously. He had proposed to her, leading her to believe that he'd break off his betrothal. More the fool she, because in the end, Fulvia's beauty and charm convinced him otherwise.

She left the supper room, nodding pleasantly to everyone she recognized, planning to head straight for her attic. No one would miss her. The ball was a success; the Regent's presence alone had guaranteed that. Moreover, she'd heard murmurs on all sides about the excellence of the food and the fragrant lemon trees. Her uncle could take over hosting duties for the rest of the night.

When she reached the entry, a large hand suddenly clamped onto her forearm from behind and squeezed it, jerking her about. "Where are you

going?” the viscount hissed.

Ella pulled her arm away, rubbing the bruise that would surely appear by the morning. “I must check the ladies’ retiring room,” she improvised. “Mrs. Beverly told me that the toweling had run out.”

“I’m unsurprised, given your wretched housekeeping,” the viscount said. He was clearly in a high temper: he had the expression he wore only after being shamed. It was rare, but Ella had seen it.

One such occasion was when her father’s best friend cut the viscount dead after her parents’ funeral. His lordship’s eulogy for his brother had extolled the fact that Providence had bestowed upon him the title that he deserved.

Could it be that the Prince Regent had shamed him? Her uncle cared for the opinion of no one below his own rank of viscount. So, it might have been a duke.

The Duke of Lennox looked like a righteous man, and Ella had heard him called a war hero.

It hardly needed to be said that her uncle would never consider putting himself in harm’s way for the sake of his country.

Or anything, or anyone else.

“I’ll be speaking to you after the ball,” the viscount snarled, after checking to make sure that no one could overhear him. “You’ve eaten your last meal under my roof.”

Ella blinked at him. “Who will be your housekeeper, Uncle? Who will pay your bills when there’s no money to pay them? Who will care for your wife?”

He reached out, quick as a viper, and pinched her arm, twisting his powerful fingers. “My wife can run the country estate herself. She doesn’t deserve a London establishment like this one. She’s a puling, miserable excuse for a lady. She’s already in bed, did you know that?”

Ella pulled away again and crossed her arms. The mark he made stood out lividly on her upper arm.

“Aye, you’ll have to use those great udders of yours to make a living now,” the viscount said, his eyes resting unpleasantly on her breasts. “I saw you talking to Quinsey’s by-blow, Bianca White. Trolling for customers, no doubt. Perhaps the two of you can walk the streets together.”

Ella had forgotten the combined effect of her low bodice and short stays. She dropped her arms. “You are a terrible person!” she flashed at him.

He snorted. “Speak for yourself. *You* allowed your cousin to be ruined. How will you sleep at night, knowing that? Your innocent sixteen-year-old

cousin up there on stage like a west-end comet, or so they tell me. It's all your fault!"

Ella gasped. "Fulvia is not ruined!" Her heart started hammering in her throat. "Everyone is complimenting Lord Peregrine on his future wife."

"No thanks to you. Or my wretched wife." From down the corridor, a burst of drunken laughter broke from the library, repurposed as a game room. Not that her uncle ever used the room to read. "*He did it,*" the viscount added.

"What? Who?"

"He saved her," her uncle spat. "Lord Peregrine saved her; I heard all about it. Of course, that rescue was due to my paternal instinct in arranging her marriage. Peregrine needn't think that I'll reconsider his settlement, based on this scandal. But you ..." He narrowed his eyes.

Ella jumped away before he could pinch her again. Her stomach felt hollow as his words sank in. "Are you saying that if Lord Peregrine hadn't stepped forward, Fulvia's reputation would have been destroyed?"

"No good for anything but playing a light woman on the stage. No one would have flicked an eyelash if Peregrine jilted her. You're a damn fool not to know that," the viscount said. "You and my wife. And my daughter too."

"Just for acting out part of a play?" Ella cried incredulously. "For goodness' sake, Fulvia has been performing entire Shakespeare plays for most of her life!"

"Not in public, and not with a professional actor. She shamed me. The prince laughed, laughed at *me!*"

Ella felt no satisfaction in realizing her guess was right: the viscount had been humiliated by royalty. "We're lucky that Lord Peregrine was so gracious," she said numbly.

"Get the damned toweling," the viscount hissed and turned, his face wreathed in a smile. "Your Grace!"

The Duchess of Lennox was not merely beautiful and titled; Ella had heard one gentleman whisper to another that she was "delicious." Her bosom was as large as Ella's and her bodice as low, which was reassuring.

Yet on the other hand, Her Grace's skin looked as delicate as a flower blossom, whereas Ella had scars and burns from years of hard work.

Her Grace gave the viscount a measured look and turned to Ella. "Miss St. Trevelyon, will you please escort me to the ladies' retiring room?"

"Of course, Your Grace," Ella said, rising from a low curtsy.

She led the way upstairs, feeling her uncle's eyes on her like a sharp stick

poking her backbone. Panic was pressing on her throat.

Fulvia, almost ruined.

Her uncle, more furious than she'd ever seen him.

Threatening her. Threatening to throw her out.

What would become of Starlight? Josephina and her babies? Perhaps Fiennes ...

Fiennes belonged to Fulvia now.

She clamped her lips into a tight smile as she pushed open the door to the retiring room and gestured for the duchess to precede her.

Her aunt's sewing chamber had been repurposed for the night; a screen sheltered any lady using the chamber pot, and Ella had assigned a maid to the room, ready to stitch up a hem if needed. Two comfortable sofas offered a refuge for wallflowers or anyone needing respite from the potent combination of dance and gossip.

The maid was nowhere to be seen, so she must have dashed away to empty a full chamber pot.

Her Grace strolled into the room and paused. "I was hoping that you had one of those new Lewis Commodes," she said with a sigh.

Ella rolled her eyes at the duchess's back. Her uncle had been known to urinate on the wainscoting when inebriated and then insist that the odor be undetectable by morning. In his world, people existed to remove bodily wastes. He certainly wouldn't spend a penny on an easier solution.

Her Grace turned about. "I must say, I love that gown, especially the trim. I haven't seen anything so lovely since my mother showed me one of her evening dresses, long ago when I was a young girl."

Ella looked down at her mother's trim, and such a deep, all-encompassing sense of grief swept through her that she hadn't the faintest prayer of stopping the sob that burst from her throat.

"Oh dear," the duchess said, catching Ella's hand and guiding her over to a sofa. "What's happened, dear?"

"Noth—Nothing," Ella managed, as they sank down side by side. Sobs wedged in her chest were forcing their way out, no matter how she struggled to regain control.

The duchess drew her against her shoulder and pressed a handkerchief into her hand. "This is your first Season, isn't it?"

Ella nodded and choked with another shaking sob.

"Last Season, you would have found me here, huddled on this very sofa,

praying that my chaperone didn't force me back onto the dancefloor."

The duchess was obviously adored by her husband. Ella felt momentary surprise, though it was quickly swept away by misery. She had believed Fiennes when he said he wanted to marry her. Not that he loved her the way the Duke of Lennox loved his wife.

After her uncle's revelations about Fulvia's ruined reputation, she thought that perhaps Fiennes truly *had* planned to marry her, not to ravish her.

Yet he was such a good man, a principled man, that he came to Fulvia's rescue.

Unfortunately, that meant he couldn't come to *her* rescue.

"Do you mind if I call you Ella?" the duchess was asking. "You may call me Bea. That's short for Beatrice, which is a name I detest." Her voice was warmly reassuring, as if the world was a place where a random housekeeper could chat with a duchess.

"Mine is Fenella," Ella managed. She straightened and wiped the tears from her face, ordering herself to stop crying. "I hate it too, so please call me Ella."

"Fenella is even worse than Beatrice," the duchess said cheerfully. "Ella is lovely. What happened, dear? Did my sister-in-law say something filthy to you?"

Ella took a moment to decipher that question. "You mean Lady Regina?"

The door burst open before Her Grace could answer, and another young lady barreled in. She didn't make it to the sofa: she closed the door, leaned back against it, and pressed a hand to her throat as though struggling to catch her breath.

Ella remembered Miss White from the receiving line. She had masses of black curls, with one striking, snow-white ringlet above her brow. Her face was enchanting, with large eyes and crimson lips. Her skin was a perfectly even golden-brown, without a blemish to be seen.

Ella glanced down at her own upper arm. Her uncle's pinch stood out lividly among her other various nicks and scars.

"Polite society is as savage as a jungle," Her Grace commented wryly, standing up. "Dear Miss White, do join us."

Miss White obviously hadn't realized anyone was in the room; she startled, then threw them a desperate look. "I'm sorry," she said, blushing. "I didn't know ... I thought ..." Her face crumpled.

The duchess gently guided her to the sofa. "I shall do introductions, and

we won't bother with curtsies, shall we? I'm Bea, sometimes a duchess. This is Ella St. Trevelyon, and Ella, this is Bianca White. If I'm not wrong, you are both enjoying your first Season, and believe me, I use the word 'enjoying' with ironic emphasis."

Ella took a shuddering breath. "I'm so sorry you haven't enjoyed our ball, Miss White."

"Bianca," the lady said. She registered Ella's red, burning eyes. "Are you having a dreadful evening too?"

Ella nodded.

"I was just inquiring whether Lady Regina had anything to do with it," the duchess remarked. "She made my life a living hell last year, and the fact she's now my sister-in-law has not blinded me to her faults."

Bianca dropped her head.

The duchess took her hand and held it tightly. "Oh no," Her Grace groaned. "What did she say?"

"I could not repeat it," Bianca said, shaking her head hard. "First, she trapped me next to the refreshment table, then after she saw me dance, she cornered me again and ... I have never met anyone so cruel."

"Last Season, she called me bovine, fat, a slut, and a plough-horse," the duchess said flatly. "She's a dreadful person."

Bianca gasped. "Oh."

"You needn't repeat her words, if you don't want to," Her Grace said. "I am a full year away from her insults, but during the last Season I could not have uttered them aloud. Regina's cruelty targets anyone whom she considers lesser, but she is particularly brutal when her target is a beautiful woman."

Bianca shook her head and let out a shuddering breath.

"You are beautiful," the duchess told her. She turned to Ella. "And you. And I as well." She smiled with all the giddy triumph of a woman who had married the most eligible gentleman in the United Kingdom, a man who made no bones about being in love with his wife.

Ella managed a tight smile. "Regina has said nothing unkind to me." She got up and went to splash water on her face, pressing a wet linen cloth on her eyes. "I am merely overwhelmed."

"I noticed that your aunt has retired to her bedchamber," the duchess said sympathetically. "That was unfortunate, since I'm sure she would not have allowed her daughter to perform that theatrical scene."

"Your cousin played Juliet!" Bianca exclaimed. "She is so very good."

“And so very scandalous,” the duchess said wryly. “She is fortunate that my husband’s friend, Lord Peregrine, jumped in to save her rather than disavowing the betrothal.”

Ella’s stomach gave a sickening lurch, but she had herself under control now. “Miss Bianca, I am so sorry about whatever was said to you. I’m afraid that in my aunt’s absence, I must return to the ball.”

“You don’t look as if you’ve been sobbing,” the duchess murmured. She elbowed Bianca gently. “Isn’t that hideously unfair?”

Ella smiled, a genuine smile. “I’m so glad to have met you, Your Grace. And you, Bianca. I hope the rest of the evening is far better.”

“I’m waiting for the starry, starry night,” the duchess said with a gurgle of laughter. “I fancy kissing my husband under a falling star or two. Any sign of them?”

“Not yet.” Ella hesitated. “You do realize how unreliable the Almanac can be?”

“Well, of course! How on earth could a mere mortal predict when stars will fall?”

Bianca managed a smile. “The Earl of Eagleton told me that the chance of even one star falling is a million to one.”

“Eagleton?” the duchess’s brow furled. “Not the rake they call The Huntsman?”

“He’s marrying Lady Regina,” Ella said.

Then, seeing the devastated look in Bianca’s eyes, she added quickly, “That’s what *she* says, but he may not even know of her plans!”

“His plans mirror hers,” Bianca said grimly.

“Oh no,” the duchess said. “Do you have another handkerchief, dear?” she asked Ella.

Ella took one from the stack of perfectly pressed, starched handkerchiefs awaiting lachrymose ladies, and handed it to Bianca. No matter how her uncle had insulted her, she was an excellent housekeeper.

“How did you get that mark on your arm?” the duchess asked sharply.

“I barreled straight into the corner of the mantelpiece,” Ella said. “Ouch! But it will quickly pass. Now I must leave. I’m worried about my cousin, given that the viscountess felt ill and retired to bed.”

“Good point!” The duchess flapped her hands. “Go make certain that rash girl doesn’t do anything to upset her engagement, or she’ll truly be in the suds!”

Ella dropped a curtsy and smiled. "I shall do my best."

Fulvia claimed to be as good an actor as anyone on the stage of the Theater Royal.

Perhaps it was a family trait.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

IN WHICH STARS FALL

It was after eleven o'clock when the butler appeared in the drawing room door. "Ladies and gentlemen, we have received reports of several falling stars," he announced.

In a babbling wave, the guests flooded toward the French doors that led to the garden. The viscount caught his daughter's arm, saying loudly that Fulvia wasn't going into the dark garden without a chaperone.

Fiennes registered that with ironic disdain: it was a bit late for the viscount to suddenly claim that he gave a damn about his daughter's reputation.

He found Ella in the crowd as easily as if there were a tightrope slung between them. Their eyes met, and she shook her head, saying silently, "Stay away."

"I refuse," Fiennes said back, silently.

She turned away, her shoulder saying the obvious: He was no more to her than a future cousin-in-law.

He ignored that, drifting after her like a fox on the trail of a rabbit. She had her hand wrapped around Devin's arm, and Fiennes found himself grinding his teeth.

He swallowed back a groan. He had to marry Fulvia.

But everything in him wanted to marry Ella.

Outside, the sky was unexpectedly clear for a London night, with neither coal smoke nor clouds blurring the stars. Fiennes couldn't bring himself to speak to anyone; he backed into the shadow of the house and watched guests milling around the lawn. Even the Regent had emerged from the card room and joined Fulvia and her father.

A light streaked across the sky and was greeted by excited shouts.

The night was warm, but not warm enough, given that Ella's entire chest was exposed. Fiennes caught the butler's eye and nodded at Ella. Jarvis whisked away, returning with a wrap.

Ella appeared to be introducing Devin to the butler, an unusual action. She smiled up at his friend, and a tremor went through Fiennes's body, his fist curling at his side.

He forced himself to look toward his fiancée instead. Belying the dislike he'd seen in her eyes when looking at St. Trevelyon, Fulvia was playing a charming Cordelia to her father's Lear, clinging to his arm as if she loved him more than words could express.

Footmen were carrying chairs and blankets onto the lawn. The guests spread into groups, younger people sitting down as if they were at a picnic, watching the sky with excitement and shrieking at each falling star.

Devin and Ella drifted further down the lawn toward the shore of the Thames, so Fiennes followed. More stars fell.

Fiennes ignored the sky, watching Devin to make damn certain that he didn't try to hold Ella's hand. They joined a group including Devin's sisters, seated on quilts and excitedly wishing on each star.

Fiennes stood in the shadow of a fragrant lilac bush. As if she were as aware of him as he was of her, Ella turned her head and looked at him, eyes wide, lips parted.

"Come," he said silently. "Please."

"No," she retorted, her beautiful lips still.

"Please."

She leaned over to the young lady beside her and whispered something. The miss was busy charting falling stars and merely nodded. Ella stood.

Fiennes stayed where he was, his heart pounding its way out of his chest. It actually hurt, as if muscles were suffocating an organ that had never made itself known to him before.

Then Ella slid into place beside him, a dark wrap hiding her magnificent bosom.

Which was good.

Excellent, in fact. He was marrying another woman.

"I have to tell you that I don't want—" Fiennes began and stopped, unable to say the words aloud.

Her eyes made him dizzy. When he didn't continue, she said, "I was surprised by your announcement. But thereafter, Devin told me what Fulvia had inadvertently done. She had no idea. She simply loves theater more than anything."

"Acting, more than anything."

“Well, I suppose so, except to this date, I’ve been her only audience.”

Fiennes caught Ella’s hand and drew her silently backward through a gap in the laurel hedge. “So she would perform for you?”

Ella’s eyes glinted at him. “Did you think I wouldn’t notice that we are now in private, as well as in scandalous proximity? I must return to the house. It’s after midnight, and Jarvis will need me.”

He shook his head. “No, you’re not the housekeeper tonight. You’re Miss Ella St. Trevelyon, whom my father met and told me to marry.”

She blinked. “What?”

“Do you remember meeting a stout gentleman, some years ago? Due to an accident as a boy, he had a silver-topped cane, and he always wore a wig.”

Her eyes widened. “Lord Peregrine! I didn’t remember his name. We played chess!”

“I didn’t know you played, only that you discussed the game.”

“I beat him,” Ella said. “I’m afraid that your father was disgruntled.”

Fiennes snorted. “He didn’t share that detail. My father had a low opinion of the female sex. But he suggested I marry you.”

Her eyes softened.

The pressure of his betrothal was sitting on his chest. Tonight was stolen time. Tomorrow ...

“I haven’t yet signed the betrothal papers,” he said, his voice rasping. Behind her shoulders more stars streaked down, as if the very heavens were exploding.

“You have no choice,” Ella said, her smile a ghost in her eyes, not touching her mouth. “I’m sorry, Fiennes, but you are a true gentleman to save Fulvia from the consequences of her imprudence. I appreciate that.”

“I don’t want to be a gentleman,” he growled.

“You scarcely know me,” she pointed out. “I can be frightfully irritating, and you’d probably end up loathing me. I’m terribly stubborn too.”

“As stubborn as my mother? Would you leave me, never speak to me again, abide only in your room so as to avoid me?”

Ella gulped, her eyes caught on his.

He could read her expression. He saw desire, and tenderness, and something that would be love one day.

“No,” she said quietly. “I’m afraid that I would always be waiting for you to come home.”

The words rang in his very bones. “Oh God, Ella, I would do anything if I

knew you were waiting for me.”

“I don’t mean that I won’t marry another man, like some sort of pitiful spinster,” she said, her eyes narrowing. “I’m no Juliet. I intend to marry this Season. If not you, someone else.”

He nodded, though everything in him protested. “That’s fair.” He reached out and caught her shoulders. “One kiss, Ella. I’m not married. I’m still a free man.”

Her mouth opened to say something, but no sound escaped.

“Please?” his eyes asked.

She didn’t say no, aloud or silently, so he reached out and slowly drew her closer, giving her time to protest. Her lips were plush and sweet under his. He kept his eyes open, not wanting to miss anything, and she did as well. Their mouths opened at the same moment, and then the kiss wasn’t sweet but hungry.

His arms closed around her, and she shifted closer, settling in his arms. A low and urgent sound came from Fiennes’s throat.

Young ladies screamed on the lawn as more stars fell, which meant that no one heard her moan. Except for him. He was fever hot, heart thudding, tongue caressing her mouth, then her jaw, her throat, back to her mouth ...

“We must stop,” she said in a husky whisper, sometime later.

Fiennes pretended not to hear her.

“Fiennes! Your hand ...”

He looked down. His hand was cupping her right breast. He hadn’t even realized. “Damn,” he muttered.

Behind her head, five stars fell all at once, as if they burned themselves to nothing in a flare of light. From the other side of the laurel hedge, a collective shriek went up from the guests.

“I must go,” Ella whispered. “I cannot dally with you, Fiennes. You will be ...”

“I will be your cousin-in-law,” Fiennes said, his voice a growl.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

A FAMILY GATHERING

At two in the morning, clouds closed in over London, chasing the guests back into the house. The orchestra took up their instruments again, and dancing recommenced.

As exquisite and fresh as the moment she first descended from the stairs, Fulvia smiled up at the Prince of Wales as they circled the floor. That dance was an extraordinary compliment for a young miss, but as everyone noticed, she showed no signs of unbecoming vanity.

The pleasure had gone out of the evening for Ella. Gentlemen thronged about her, asking to dance, but she could scarcely manage a smile.

Just looking at Fiennes made her feel cold and stiff.

A childish internal wail insisted that her cousin had everything that she wanted. No matter how often she reminded herself that she scarcely knew Fulvia's fiancé, and couldn't really say she "wanted" him ...

She didn't believe herself.

She did want Fiennes.

Finally, she retreated upstairs and changed into a plain gown, creeping down the rear stairs to discover the kitchen in a frenzy because the Regent and his friends had demanded herb omelets. Ella coaxed their cook out of bed and helped her crack eggs for the next hour.

At dawn, the last of their guests trundled out the door, stuffed with omelets and the extra food from the Savoy Club—better than anything supplied by Fortnum & Mason.

Ella was wearily helping Jarvis wash the gold-rimmed china her mother had brought with her to the marriage when a nervous footman arrived with the unwelcome news that the viscount had demanded that the family join him in the drawing room.

Ella walked into the chamber to find Fiennes seated beside Fulvia, looking bored and dismissive. Of course, he was a member of her family.

She felt as if she couldn't breathe, panic rising in her chest, but somehow her body kept moving forward. Her aunt was drooping on the settee, so Ella sat down beside her.

"Why aren't you in bed?" she whispered.

"I rose to bid goodbye to His Majesty," her aunt said miserably.

"You deign to join us, Niece!" her uncle snapped. "Those pearls on your head do not pair well with a filthy apron. You look a fright. Remove that circlet at once."

Ella looked down at herself. "They're only water spots from washing china." But she unpinned her pearl headpiece and set it to the side.

Fiennes glanced at her apron and then turned to regard her uncle from under lowered lids. She was acutely aware that he no longer looked bored. His face was hard and angry.

"Back to the kitchens," her uncle snapped, which was when Ella realized that Jarvis had followed her and was standing just inside the drawing room door.

"I am certain that you would not wish the household to overhear your concerns, my lord," the butler said quietly. "I shall guard the entrance, so no one enters."

With a huff, the viscount wheeled about, glaring at his family. They'd all seen him in a million rages, but there was something unnerving about his abandonment tonight. He was obviously drunk, for one thing.

He launched a diatribe that his sozzled state rendered nearly unintelligible.

Apparently, after he followed His Majesty into the gaming room, a guest had shared a vivid depiction of Fulvia "playing the role of a shameless wench, no better than a brassy wag-tail in a brothel," as the viscount summed it up.

"This is scrupulousness run mad," Fulvia said dispassionately. "Shakespeare cannot be considered ill-fit for any educated woman to know by heart."

"Not true," the viscount bellowed. "Parts of your speech were described to me as 'unfit to be uttered by any woman of modesty.'"

The recollection further inflamed him; he began swaggering up and down delivering a lecture about propriety, his slurred words echoing in the near-empty room as he slapped his white gloves against his thigh for emphasis.

He moved from Fulvia—whose uninterested attitude made her difficult to chide—to his wife, for leaving her "stupid, stupid daughter unchaperoned"—

with no reference to his own role in parenting.

“What do you have to say for yourself?” he demanded, bending down and thrusting his red face close to his wife’s.

The viscountess flinched. “I didn’t feel very well,” she faltered.

“While you were resting in your bed, having given in to your nerves as only the most selfish would do during a daughter’s debut, that same daughter was ruining herself. Cavorting with a ruttish actor, disgracing herself in front of all polite society.”

He paused for breath. Ella wrapped an arm around her aunt’s shoulders and whispered, “Don’t listen.”

The viscountess sighed, a noise so quiet that it could scarcely be heard by a mouse. “I never do.”

Meanwhile, Fulvia sat quietly, her eyes resting on her father with calm derision. She refused to answer any demands, turning her attention to her fingernails when directly addressed.

Beside her, Fiennes was equally calm. But there was something about his stature that suggested to Ella that he was ready to leap from the settee and overpower the viscount.

After another five minutes, the viscountess sagged against Ella’s arm and appeared from her regular breathing to have gone to sleep.

Ella couldn’t help stealing glances at Fiennes from under her lashes. The moment when he rescued her by sending a footman to the Savoy Club felt as if it had happened in another lifetime, to another lady.

Then, he had looked at her with passionate tenderness in his eyes. Now Fiennes’s gaze moved over her as if she were a piece of furniture.

“*You!*” the viscount said, abruptly wheeling about and fixing his eyes on Ella for the first time. “This is all *your* fault!”

As if he’d worked out a math problem, he dabbed his round forehead. Ella had the sudden conviction that her uncle had padded his chest as well as his calves: he seemed to be swollen everywhere, his waistcoat holding him in precariously.

Ella raised an eyebrow. “I had no idea Fulvia meant to play Juliet until Lady Regina announced the same.”

“I didn’t inform anyone other than Regina,” Fulvia said in an even voice.

Behind the viscount’s thin legs, Ella saw Fiennes flex his calves, a cautious movement that reminded her of the way Starlight settled into a crouch before bursting into motion and knocking Josephina’s acorns out of

her paws.

The viscount was purple in the cheeks. “Don’t lie to me! You aided and abetted a plan to allow the execrable presence, a professional actor, into the house of my ancestors.”

“No, I did not,” Ella said.

“I understand he touched Fulvia’s hand with his fat paw, that they exchanged endearments. Desecrated the person of my child.”

The viscountess’s eyelids fluttered. She murmured, “No, no, surely not,” and lapsed back to sleep.

“You are useless!” the viscount howled at his wife.

He leaned in toward Ella. The sides of his mouth were flecked with spittle, and his eyes glossy and unfocused. “Your days are numbered in this house, girl! I’ve given you room and board only from the goodness of my heart, when any other man would have long ago dismissed you.”

“I see,” Ella said.

Furious at her composure, he retorted, “You are useless to me! The one important task you had, you failed. Now my only daughter is the laughingstock of every decent man in London.”

Behind him, Fiennes stood, his massive shoulders seeming twice the breadth of the viscount’s to Ella’s tired eyes. “Do you count the Prince of Wales among these decent men?” he inquired.

The viscount only barely managed to stay on his feet during the intricate process of swiveling to face Fiennes. “His Majesty is pure of heart and noble of deed.”

“Optimistic, indeed,” Fulvia said, rising and stepping forward to stand beside her betrothed. “The Regent propositioned me, Father.”

A moment of silence, then, like the hiss of a snake, her father said, “Surely you expected as much, Daughter? You asked for it! Your behavior led to the prince—my dear friend, His Majesty—judging my own offspring no better than a drab, a creature of the stage.”

“A few lines of Shakespearean verse and you excuse a royal lout’s debased behavior toward a woman of your family?” Fiennes demanded.

Ella’s heart felt like a cold fist in her chest. Fiennes was defending Fulvia, his future wife. Of course, he was. It was humiliating to realize just how much she had hoped that he would protect *her*, hold her close, take her away.

Fiennes’s derisive tone sank through to the viscount’s befuddled brain. “This is a family discussion,” his lordship said, drawing himself up. “I must

ask you to absent yourself so that I can speak to my family in the privacy they deserve.”

“No,” Fiennes stated. He stood still, his powerful body entirely relaxed.

The viscount swept back the oiled lock of hair that had fallen over his forehead. He was sweating profusely, and Ella could smell brandy emanating from his skin.

Her heart sank, looking at Fiennes and Fulvia standing shoulder to shoulder. They were so very beautiful, like rulers of the Land of the Worthy.

Dishwater had now soaked through her apron to her legs. She was crumpled and plain, while they glowed.

She was a housekeeper, and Fulvia was a lady.

The pain of that comparison felt like the lash of a whip; she instinctively tightened her arm around her aunt, who raised her head and blinked confusedly.

Fulvia said, “Father, I suspect that you engaged in unwise gambling this evening.”

“How dare you!” the viscount said, blowing up like a child’s balloon.

“I recognize the shame you evidence when you have had a *particularly* poor showing at the gaming tables,” his daughter said.

“How dare you question me?”

“Ella’s inheritance paid for this ball,” Fulvia said in her high, clear voice. “For the hired footmen, for the salmon patties, for the bottles and bottles of champagne that were sent into the gaming room.”

Fiennes’s eyes narrowed. “Is that the case?”

Fulvia put a hand on his arm. “We shall repay her.”

He glanced at his fiancée and nodded.

They were partners.

The truth of it sank into Ella’s chest like a blade. It didn’t matter that Fiennes was marrying Fulvia as the act of a gentleman. It didn’t matter that he had briefly wanted to marry Ella.

He and Fulvia would bed each other, eat breakfast together, parent children together. Her cousin was not a terrible woman. She wasn’t vain or cruel.

He would come to love her, as Ella loved her. Even though she was jealous of Fulvia, she still loved the girl who endlessly begged her to read *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* just one more time.

Next to Ella, the viscountess was muttering, “Oh dear, oh dear.” She began to rise, so Ella stood as well, supporting her aunt with an arm around her

waist.

“My useless wife has decided to join the conversation!” the viscount said. “Ella’s inheritance was sacrificed for naught because of your laziness. What lady retires to bed *during her own daughter’s debut ball*?”

The viscountess swallowed hard. “I ... I was so tired that I became dizzy,” she faltered.

“For shame!” Fulvia said to her father, showing her first sign of emotion as she came around to take her mother’s other arm.

“The shame is yours and your mother’s,” the viscount snarled.

“My mother is likely carrying the heir to your title,” Fulvia retorted. “You are shouting at a woman in a delicate condition, moreover, one who is vital to your future and that of the house in which we stand.”

The viscountess gave a little moan.

Her husband’s eyes bulged until he resembled a bullfrog, to Ella’s eyes. If he’d been purple earlier, now he looked as if he’d been steeped in beet juice.

“A *child*,” he said, his voice dropping a full octave. “A child, my lady. Is this true?”

The viscountess nodded her head with all the animation of a wooden puppet on strings.

“Since you rarely attend church, I assume you are not claiming immaculate conception.”

His wife gasped but didn’t answer. The viscount stepped forward, and before Ella had any idea what he planned, he slapped his wife in the face hard with his gloves.

Ella screamed and pulled her aunt backwards. Fiennes took a step and shoved the viscount to the side. Her uncle lurched and caught himself on the back of a chair.

“A child!” The viscount glared at Ella’s aunt. “It seems my wife is as much of a whore as my daughter, because that is *not my child!*”

The only sound in the room was a solid *thunk* as Fiennes knocked out Viscount St. Trevelyon with one blow to the jaw.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

HORROR ON ALL SIDES

The viscountess gave a small gasp and fainted dead away, her right cheek stained crimson from the imprint of her husband's blow.

Ella and Fulvia managed to catch her and lowered her gently to the floor.

Ella fell to her knees, rubbing her aunt's hands. Until Fiennes crouched beside her and offered her a handkerchief, she didn't realize that tears were pouring down her face.

She looked up to find Jarvis a silently appalled presence at her shoulder.

"Summon footmen, as we need someone to lug the guts—in other words, my father—out of the room," Fulvia said, rising and nodding to Jarvis. "That's from *Hamlet*, in case anyone dislikes my phrasing."

Jarvis ignored her, coming to his knees beside the viscountess, opposite Ella. "My lady," he said, his voice deeper than normal

The viscountess opened her eyes and burst into sobs.

The butler said to Ella, "With your permission, I will carry her ladyship to her chamber and summon her maid."

Ella nodded. With one smooth gesture, Jarvis plucked her aunt from the floor and walked away cradling her against his chest, not even glancing at his master, who was beginning to stir.

"I suppose the guts can stay where they are," Fulvia muttered.

"I believe it would be salutary to have a conversation with your father," Fiennes said grimly. He walked over and prodded the viscount with his foot.

Ella rose and went to stand next to Fiennes and Fulvia. Her uncle rolled over and managed to get himself on his feet, muttering curses.

He turned around, caught sight of the three of them, and made a sound like a wet, furious cat. "You put hands on me, Peregrine, which is not the act of a gentleman! I shall tell the world, make no mistake about that." He wiped a few drops of blood from the corner of his lips and gingerly felt his jaw.

"No gentleman strikes his wife, nor speaks of his family as you have,"

Fiennes said, his voice low and deadly.

“A fact’s a fact, isn’t it?” the viscount said sulkily. “I haven’t visited her bed in years, not being one who likes to tup a fleshy matron, so some other man serviced her.” He glanced at his daughter. “I expect your delicate sensibilities are horrified to learn that your mother played me fast and loose.”

“I am horrified to have seen my father strike my mother,” Fulvia remarked, arms folded over her chest. “I have long known you were a rotten reed, to be plain. But I did not consider you violent.”

“Shameful to be so rude to me,” the viscount said. “This younger generation is naught, my own daughter, depraved and deprived of womanly virtues.” His inflamed eyes traveled from Fulvia to Ella. “Revolting, all of you! You’re the worst of the lot,” he told Ella.

Fulvia looked as disinterested as if she were watching strangers play out a farce. But Ella felt sick to the bone.

She crumpled Fiennes’s handkerchief in her fist, telling herself not to cry. It would be a sign of weakness, and she tried to never show weakness before her uncle.

From the moment she had been informed that her parents were gone, she had prided herself on being independent and strong.

Yet somehow the image of her aunt’s head snapping backwards under the force of her husband’s blow, and then the pure ugliness of the words he had called his wife, had shaken Ella to the core.

Frightened her, even.

She felt as if her knees were weak, and she’d have liked nothing more than to lean into Fiennes and silently ask him to fight her battles.

That was absurd. He was her cousin’s future husband.

Any battles she fought she would fight alone.

“Indeed?” she said to her uncle, straightening her shoulders.

“I have been unselfish in my usage of you,” the viscount stated. “My own brother’s child, I told myself. The kindness in my own nature blinded me to the truth.”

Fiennes moved infinitesimally closer to Ella until his arm brushed hers.

“What is that truth?” she inquired.

“The truth is ugly,” her uncle said, with a melancholy grimace. “I scarcely can bring myself to say it aloud.”

“I assure you that none of us will believe or care what you say,” Fulvia stated.

“I had no idea whom I had welcomed under my roof,” the viscount said, putting a hand on the back of the settee to prop himself up. “I knew that corrupted blood—”

Fiennes cut in. “Either you shut your mouth, or I strike you again.” Lines bracketed his mouth; Ella had the idea that his next blow would slam her uncle into the next room.

The viscount opened and shut his mouth a few times, apparently considering his options. Finally, he must have decided to take Fiennes at his word, because he glowered and spat out, “You are not welcome here.”

“Yes, I am.”

The viscount’s chest swelled until it seemed to Ella that he would surely burst buttons already strained by padding. “I’ll thank you to remember that this is my house, and I am the master of it!”

“Are you?”

A curious hardness in Fiennes’s tone made Ella blink. She glanced at him and winced, swallowing hard with pure longing.

His expression was somber but calm. He held himself with all the inherent grace of a powerful man who knows the strength of his own body and, even more so, his worth. And that of the women in his life.

Fulvia was so lucky. So horribly, truthfully lucky.

Ella gave up the idea of finding her own husband. If she couldn’t have Fiennes, she didn’t want anyone. She would move to Spain.

Somewhere far, far away. It wasn’t just that she couldn’t bear to see Fiennes’s babies. She couldn’t bear to see *him* again.

She was in love, a *coupe de coeur*, as the French had it. A blow to the heart from which one never recovered.

“I fail to see your point!” the viscount snarled. In comparison to Fiennes, he looked stagnant and vicious, the glare in his eyes habitual.

“My point was that you spent most of your daughter’s debut ball in the library playing cards for high stakes.”

Ella began trembling again. “No.” The word barely escaped her lips. A warm hand landed on her lower back. Fiennes’s touch flared through her with the warmth of a blanket.

“Leave,” the viscount thundered.

Fulvia cleared her throat. “Lord Peregrine is my future husband, and as such, he is welcome here. His concern for our reputation is as strong as mine.”

Ella drew in a breath and moved.

Fiennes's hand fell away.

"I wish to point out," his daughter added, "that when you cast aspersions on my mother, you taint that family name."

"Family name, family name," the viscount said pettishly. "What do I care for the future when my present is so vile? When my own wife has played the strumpet?"

"How lucky you are that your *dear* wife may well be carrying the heir to your title," Fulvia stated.

"You reference my shame with the lightness of a woman of no heart," her father retorted. "You are clearly a maiden of no sensibility. One who has no respect for her aged father, cuckolded in the prime of life." His voice caught dramatically, and he moaned, "No more of that."

Fiennes nodded. "Your wife's child, if male, will inherit the Northern lands, your title." He paused. "This house."

The viscount's eyes shifted, and Ella's heart sank.

"You gambled the house!" she cried.

"The devil I did," the viscount said. But there was a curious flatness in his voice.

"I can't believe you lost the house," Ella gasped. "Who owns the house now?"

After a silence, he spat, "Thomas Tyrwhitt."

"Familiarly known as 'Clod,'" Fiennes put in with evident disgust. "How on earth did you manage to lose to him?"

"Never mind that!" Ella exclaimed. "Where will my aunt live? Where—"

"She'll live in the country, as she always has," the viscount shouted. "I suppose I shall have to accept the truth that no one can know that my wife carries a cuckoo. You don't think I can bear to see her countenance, do you? She'll go to the country, and you'll go with her, unless I decide to throw you to the street."

Fiennes took one step forward and caught the back of the viscount's collar, hoisting him upwards so only his lordship's toes touched the ground.

"What the devil!" the viscount cried in strangled tones. His high collar was caught under his chin, his neckcloth plunging forward like a frothing waterfall.

Fiennes gave him a hard shake. "You will behave in a respectful way to your wife, daughter, and niece, or I shall make you do so."

Ella's uncle managed a croak of a laugh. "You may think you're going to marry my daughter, but not if I withdraw my consent. They all told me, the Regent told me, that Fulvia is the most beautiful woman in London. She can have anyone."

"Don't be an utter ass," Fulvia said dispassionately. "We are all in Lord Peregrine's hands, Father, though it seems you are too stupid to realize it."

Fiennes shook the viscount once more and then opened his hand. His lordship's knees buckled but he caught himself on the back of the settee and popped upright like a jack-in-the-box.

"I should check on my aunt," Ella said. Shock had ripped through her body so many times in one night that she felt as if she'd been beaten.

"No, that is my task," Fulvia said, turning without further ado and walking away.

"Don't leave my presence without—" the viscount bawled, caught sight of Fiennes's face, and cut off the sentence.

"You will behave respectfully to your family," Fiennes said, slowly, as if he were addressing an elderly person who needed to read his lips. "Do you understand?"

"You think I will take instructions from a mere baron?" the viscount retorted, his lip curling. "A baron whose father was granted the title due to his ability to sell fruits and vegetables? The St. Trevelyon viscountcy goes back for generations."

Ella gritted her teeth. "When do we have to leave the house?"

"I am being abominably treated," her uncle said petulantly. "My future son-in-law has treated me with all the respect that one gives a blighted criminal, at the same time that I have endured the greatest betrayal of my life, learning that the serpent I nursed in my bosom, the wife whose chastity was everything to—"

He caught Fiennes's glance and broke off. "I am hard used. My friends will weep for me."

"Your friends think you a fool," Fiennes said, his voice hard. "They take you for your money and will keep taking from you until you and your family are vagrants, cast out on the mercy of the road."

"You are a hard man," the viscount said sullenly.

"How long do we have?" Ella asked again. "How long will this Clod Tyrwhitt give us before he takes possession of my parents' house?"

"Two weeks!"

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

SURPRISE!

The viscount headed toward the door without another word.

Ella's mind reeled. How was she to move the household in a mere two weeks? What would happen to the furniture? Her father's books?

Fiennes touched her shoulder. "Are you all right, Ella?"

The question was irrelevant. She took a deep breath. "Could you please marry my cousin in the next week?"

His jaw tightened. "If need be." His voice grated.

"That would be most helpful," Ella told him. She had a sour, ugly feeling in her stomach at the idea of that marriage, but it didn't matter.

Nothing mattered, really.

She startled as the viscount slammed the door to the drawing room behind him.

Morning light was starting to show outside the long windows, but Fiennes's eyes were shuttered by long lashes, and she couldn't read his expression.

"I have so much to do," she explained numbly. "It would be marvelous if I didn't have to worry about Fulvia."

"You cannot move this household to the country by yourself," Fiennes stated.

Ella blinked at him. "My aunt is in a delicate condition. Fulvia is marrying you. My uncle will consider his part in the arrangements concluded when his valet moves his clothing to his club. Or to a hotel, if one will—"

She whirled around. Her mother's pearl circlet was no longer on the table. Her uncle would presumably use it to finance his stay in a hotel.

Pain felt as if it might tear her open, but it wouldn't. It never had before, after all.

"I will help you," Fiennes said. "Now you need to sleep."

"No, you will not help," she said crossly.

“As a member of your family, it is obligatory for me to assist you.” He took her arm.

It would be rude to pull away, so she let him escort her to the entry. Without a word, he started up the stairs. Her limbs leaden with exhaustion, Ella leaned on his arm up those steps, and up the narrow stairway to the attic. Fiennes pushed open the door.

“May I greet Josephina?” he asked.

He stood in the doorway, his broad shoulders scarcely fitting the narrow entrance. In the dawn light, his face was chiseled without a hint of softness: no dimple, no rounded chin, no pouting bottom lip.

Ella turned around and despite her exhaustion, Fiennes’s betrothal, the horrible aftermath of the ball—her body woke up. Suddenly, the only thing on her mind was the way he kissed her under the stars. Like a fever, heat swept over her.

A rueful gleam lit his eyes. “You are the only woman I know whose face I can read,” he said.

Thankfully, Josephina interrupted him, running from her nest and calling an excited greeting.

“I’m sorry I was gone so long, darling,” Ella said, catching up the little squirrel and putting her on her shoulder.

“She looks fatter than she was a week ago,” Fiennes observed, not moving from the doorway.

“That’s why I’m keeping a hand on her. All right, you may enter,” Ella said with a wave of her other hand. “You will be a member of the family, after all.” If her voice was sardonic, it was to be expected.

He *had* proposed to her.

Fiennes walked in, taking a candied violet from his pocket and putting it on the floor. Josephina squeaked with excitement, so Ella put her down. The squirrel trundled over, grabbed the sweet, and took it away to nibble.

“Where’s Starlight?” Fiennes asked, taking out a sausage that looked as if it came from one of the rolls served at the ball.

“I can’t believe you put a sausage in your pocket!”

Next to the chimney, Starlight’s head popped over the edge of her basket. With one leap, she snatched the sausage from his fingers, flicking his leg with her tail by way of a thank you.

Josephina reappeared and squeaked a command. Fiennes bent over and she trundled onto his palm, more cautiously than she would have a week ago.

“Starlight used to play with her,” Ella told him, “but she seems to realize that Josephina is in a delicate condition.”

Fiennes cuddled the little squirrel against his massive chest, petting her head with one finger. Ella took a deep breath. It was absurd to be so affected by a large man caressing her pet.

Spain, she reminded herself. She was moving to Spain.

“Please don’t bite your lower lip unless you want me to kiss it better, Ella.”

Ella blinked and focused not on Fiennes’s chest but his eyes, which were shining with desire. She hastily backed up a step. “I will *never* be any man’s mistress!”

He stopped petting Josephina and stared at her with outraged disbelief. “You think that of me?”

“I don’t know what else *to* think. You are betrothed to my cousin. You have no right to make suggestive comments to me.”

Fiennes nodded, his face hard, as if she’d punched him in the gut.

But frankly? It was the truth.

The truth hurt, sometimes. Her uncle preferred to ignore facts when they weren’t convenient, but she’d be damned if she’d allow Fiennes to continue to flirt with her.

Not when he belonged to her cousin.

“I think you should go,” Ella stated.

“May I ask an indelicate question first?”

“I can guess the subject. The only possible father for the baby that I’ve been able to come up with is our vicar,” Ella said, dropping onto the edge of her bed as a wave of pure exhaustion overcame her. “He is handsome, and my aunt is fond of him.”

“Private prayers?” Fiennes mused. “At least a vicar presumably won’t claim his child. If male, the baby will inherit. Unless your father’s will turns up.”

Ella shook her head. “That won’t happen.”

“I’m sorry.” He walked over and sat down beside her, gently placing Josephina on the bed. “I suppose you searched the house?”

“I looked through the documents in the library, as Jarvis thought my father might have stored it there. Most likely, my uncle burned it.”

Josephina scrambled to the floor.

“Where is she going?” Fiennes asked.

Ella nodded. “The kitchen chimney is always warm, so I moved the hatbox there and gave her scraps of cloth to line her nest.” Not looking at him, she added, “You oughtn’t to be in my room, let alone sitting on my bed.”

“Did your uncle take the pearl circlet you wore earlier?”

Ella swallowed hard. “I expect so. He has often told me that everything in the house belongs to him. After the viscount overheard a conversation about the worth of early editions, I have been bringing my father’s books to the attic.”

She waved a hand at the stacks of books on her bedside table. “I shall sell them, I think, and use the money to finance our trip to the country.”

She could feel his eyes on her face.

“Ella. Please let me help.”

“If you would marry my cousin quickly, that would be a great help.”

Fiennes reached out and drew his thumb along the curve of her lower jaw. “I want you to know that—” The words seemed to stick in his throat.

“You would marry me if you could,” Ella said bleakly. His thumb was leaving a trail of fire. “I know that. I’ll ... I plan to move to Spain.”

His hand fell away. His eyes lost the slumbrous look that was making her feel warm and muddled. “Like hell you will.”

“I can’t be ... *here*,” Ella said, stumbling into speech.

“You might get ill,” Fiennes said tautly. “Far away.”

She caught up his hand. It was large and warm, the fingers roughened and powerful. “I cannot remain in London when you are married.”

She saw how hard he swallowed.

He really *could* read her eyes, because he met her halfway to a kiss. Ella’s mouth opened with a gasp before hunger took over. She had never felt more alive, her blood dancing in her veins, her hands instinctively winding into his hair.

Fiennes took her mouth ravenously. The groan in his throat made her shudder. When he put his hands on her waist and paused, she whispered, “Yes,” and he brought her onto his lap.

“Married or no,” he said against her lips. “You will never wear an apron again. I will give you diamonds and pearls. Not as my mistress, Ella, but as the person I care most for in the world.”

Ella flinched at the idea of accepting diamonds—anything of value—from her cousin’s husband. “You will not give me *anything*.”

“Then what can I give you? What do you want?” He gathered her hands to

his mouth and kissed them. “Everything I have is yours.”

She felt as if she were spinning.

After her parents died, it was as if *Ella*, the Ella that her mother and father had treasured, had died with them.

There was nothing left but a person who had to constantly prove how useful she was, day after day. Even her aunt, who genuinely loved her, never hesitated to ask her to fetch her knitting or order fish for dinner or polish the silver.

When Ella had fallen ill the year before, no one knew of it except Jarvis. To be honest, no one cared.

“I would like you to bring me a pail of warm water from the kitchens,” Ella said, blurting out the truth. “Then leave, because you will be Fulvia’s husband.”

His eyes searched hers. “You want me to marry Fulvia?”

Ella’s temper snapped. “What does it matter what I want? Who *I* desire? You told all of London this evening that you were marrying Fulvia. You didn’t inform me first, although you had proposed to me.”

“I apologize,” Fiennes said.

“You told me that a gentleman could do no different, though to my mind, a gentleman would inform a lady that he had changed his mind before announcing otherwise in her presence.”

His jaw flexed. “It was an emergency, Ella. In order to—”

“I don’t want a gentleman,” Ella interrupted. “I want a man who will love me more than his reputation. Who will at least tell me before he rejects me for another woman? I want an *honorable* man!”

Fiennes didn’t answer immediately. In the silence, she heard the morning songs of London sparrows in the tree outside her window.

Then he said stiffly, “More than anything in the world, I want to help you. I deserve everything you say, but I cannot bear to see you in this position, living in a garret.”

“If you honestly wish to help me, you can do so by marrying Fulvia quickly.”

Fiennes dropped her hands and stood. She could see pain in his eyes, but she couldn’t heal his emotion. If she had learned one thing from life, it was that life isn’t joyful.

“Is there nothing that I can do for *you*?”

“You can bring me a pail of hot water,” she repeated.

The door closed behind him. She jolted awake when he returned carrying two pails of steaming water. He poured them into her tin bath and left without a word.

Ella cried in the bath and went to bed with her hair tangled and wet, more exhausted than she'd been in her entire life.

She didn't wake until hours later when a scream echoed through the house, so piercing that it reached the attic.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

THE PRIVILEGES OF ROYAL RANK

Ella threw on a gown and ran down the narrow attic stairs, her heart pounding. That had been her aunt's scream. Was it the baby? Had her uncle become violent again?

She dreaded another scream, but silence was equally unnerving. As soon as she burst into the second-floor corridor, she could hear tempestuous sobbing coming from the viscountess's chamber.

Pushing open the door, she found her aunt sitting in a chair clutching a letter, crying as if her heart would break. Rather than menacing his wife, the viscount was seated opposite her wearing a magnificent wrapper and a petulant scowl.

"What has happened?" Ella asked, sinking to her knees beside her aunt.

"Fulvia," the viscountess said in a choked voice, waving the letter. She broke into a sob so profound that she struggled to breathe.

Ella took the letter and read it.

Then, incredulously, she read it again. "Impossible," she said faintly.

"She's ruined," Fulvia's mother cried. "I'll never see her again. My baby girl, my beautiful, beautiful baby girl."

Ella rose and faced her uncle. "Did you know this might happen?"

"You must be joking," the viscount snarled. "My only daughter, the daughter of a viscount, soiled, ruined, despoiled? What of Peregrine and his settlement, eh? I was going to spend a good part of it to move my wife's household to the country."

That was debatable, but certainly the viscount would never have let go of that settlement willingly.

"The Regent is your friend," Ella said. "Go to him. Beg him. Warn him of the scandal it will cause!"

"I have beseeched him!" the viscountess cried. "He refuses."

"Friendship with royalty does not lend itself to rebukes," the viscount

stated.

“Obviously not, or the Prince of Wales would have hesitated to abscond with your daughter, turning her into one in a long line of mistresses,” Ella retorted.

The viscountess responded with a loud wail. “My mother always said that it was better a lady die than live desecrated.”

“Stop your caterwauling,” her husband said irritably. “The Prince can’t get away with this. Fulvia’s a well-bred girl, for all she acted a brazen-faced actress at the ball. That doesn’t mean His Majesty is free to turn her into a Bird of Paradise. He starts poaching among the nobility, and the scandal will blast this country to its knees!”

“Go save her,” the viscountess said, surging to her feet. She pointed a shaking finger at her husband. “Go fetch my daughter. She’s only sixteen, in the grip of a lecher, be he royalty or no. This is *your* fault!”

The viscount narrowed his eyes. “*My* fault? I wasn’t the one catting around in the country. Obviously Fulvia learned from her mother’s adulterous ways and—”

“This conversation is not helpful,” Ella said loudly.

“My girl, my baby!” the viscountess screamed, ignoring Ella. “You must go after her, stop them! Get up, you lazy lout!”

The viscount looked at his wife contemptuously. “I’ll have a settlement out of the Regent, I’ll tell you that. He’ll pay. I’ll go to the king, mad or not. Hell, I’ll go to Parliament!”

“If you do not save Fulvia, I shall send a message to Lord Peregrine,” the viscountess cried. “*He* will recover his fiancée.”

“Good idea. His lordship tightened his wrapper and stretched his lean legs out before him, wiggling his toes. “Let Peregrine fetch her back. My friendship with the Regent would make that a tricky conversation.”

“I can’t! Peregrine won’t accept Fulvia as his bride, if he learns what’s happened,” his wife said, reversing herself. “Ruined, we are all ruined!” She wobbled over to her dressing table and snatched another handkerchief.

“’Twould be better if I saved Fulvia, and Peregrine married her,” the viscount mused, apparently weighing the financial advantages of both options against each other.

His wife dropped back into her seat. “Obviously. You must leave *now*.”

The viscount looked at her in horror. “I haven’t even garbed myself. I cannot present myself before the Regent in anything less than faultless

attire!”

“The Regent,” she spat. “A dog who is debauching your own daughter at this very moment!”

He recoiled. “I would ask you to watch your tongue, Lady St. Trevelyon. You are turning my stomach.”

“Either you are in the coach in thirty minutes,” the lady said with deadly intent, “or I will let all of London know that you have been cuckolded.”

“To the detriment of your reputation?” His mouth fell open.

“What do I care? What do I care about *anything*?” Her voice rose again. “You’ve lost this house. My daughter, my innocent daughter, is ruined. I am moving to the country with no mainstay other than my niece. I don’t give a fig if people know I played you false!”

The viscount stared at her in silence.

“People will make horns at you in the street,” she added, a distinct note of satisfaction in her voice.

Ella was shocked. Normally, her aunt couldn’t even meet her husband’s eyes, but now she was screaming at him.

Motherly love had turned her from a mouse to a lion.

Thankfully, the viscount was no longer drunk. Like many bullies, he crumpled in the face of stout opposition.

“I suppose I shall go,” he sighed, with a long-suffering air.

“Ella will accompany you,” his wife stated.

“I am exhausted,” Ella said, alarmed, “and after the ball last night, not to mention our impending move, I have much to do.”

“You must! We shall let it be known that you and Fulvia were together,” her aunt ordered. “The three of you joined the Prince of Wales for a charming breakfast at ... at what was that place she mentioned in her letter?”

“The Mad Bishop,” the viscount supplied. “His Majesty loves the inn, though I’ve always maintained that their food is tolerable at best.”

Ella swallowed hard, clearly seeing, not for the first time, the place she held in the family. She was the one who existed to fix things, no matter the cost to herself.

“I cannot get in that coach,” her aunt said. She put a hand to her stomach. “I wouldn’t survive the nausea, given the exhausted springs. You must go in my stead, Ella! You don’t mind, do you, dear?”

Ella did mind.

They were off to save Fulvia’s reputation, so that her cousin could marry

the man whom Ella wanted more than anything in the world.

“If the news leaks, we could always say that Ella ran off with His Majesty,” the viscount mused. “It’s not as if anyone cares about her reputation, after all.”

Ella’s eyes blurred, but she reined in her tears. She had nowhere to go. “I’ll only do it if you give me back my mother’s pearls,” she said to the viscount.

He frowned. “Pearls? You said they were false!”

“They were my mother’s.”

His face darkened. “You lied to me!”

He hadn’t picked up the circlet.

Ella drew in a shuddering breath.

Jarvis must have salvaged her pearls, so at least she’d have a nest egg for the day when the viscount shoved her out the door.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

WHERE IS FULVIA?

When Ella ran out to the coach a half hour later, she found the viscount arguing with his coachman.

“Drive at high speed, I won’t,” Mr. Snagsby said obstinately. “This here is an ancient vehicle. I’ll fly into a ditch if it breaks to pieces.”

The coachman was a stout, sharp-eyed man who wore the viscount’s aged livery with a certain flare. He was a good driver, but he had often told Ella that keeping the coach on the road was as miraculous an act as walking on water.

“If the coach veers into the ditch, we won’t fare well inside,” Ella told her uncle.

“Nonsense,” he said, climbing into the vehicle.

“I’ll go easy on the corners,” Mr. Snagsby said to Ella. Then he added, in a low voice, “They be saying below stairs that Miss Fulvia has run off with a duke.”

“‘With a *duke*?’ ” Ella repeated, startled.

“The carriage that took her away this morning had a ducal crest,” he confirmed.

“I’m certain this is all a misunderstanding,” Ella assured him.

Once inside, she informed her uncle, who laughed loud enough to be heard over the creaking of the coach. “That shows what idiots you are in the practice of hiring! As if a royal crest could be mistaken for a ducal one. The Regent’s crest has a *crown*. Crowned lion on one side, unicorn on the other, crown on top.”

“The Duke of Westminster’s crest has two dogs and a crown on top,” Ella pointed out.

“The coachman’s a gossiping fool. I should turn him away.”

“Then how would I move the viscountess to the country?” Ella inquired. “What of the furniture and china, by the way? I shall need to hire men with

carts.”

Her uncle shrugged. “Worthless rubbish, most of it. Perhaps Clod will pay for the furnishings.”

Ella swallowed hard at the thought of her father’s and mother’s furniture, sold for whatever a gambler would pay for them.

Her uncle eyed her, his lips pinched sourly together. “When I have my next good run, I’ll think about buying it back.”

He paused. “No, I won’t.”

They didn’t speak after that.

No matter how much Ella despised her uncle, Fulvia was only sixteen. Ella didn’t want her cousin to be a mistress, a kept woman, even if to royalty.

Just the thought of the “fashionable impure,” as Lady Regina had termed the ladies thronging the Regent’s box, made Ella shudder.

“Almost there,” the viscount said. He patted his hair and tweaked his neck cloth.

“Your leg pad has slipped,” Ella told him unsympathetically. That was Unkind Thought #8, and the day had barely begun.

She might have to resign herself to being a churlish person.

Mean as an earthworm, her mother would have said.

The memory made her swallow hard. Thinking of her parents made her chest hurt. Even worse to think of Fiennes marrying Fulvia.

She gave herself a mental shake. She wasn’t alone in the world. Her aunt, her poor aunt, needed her.

Lord St. Trevelyon was bent over, tugging at his calf pad while muttering curses about “ungrateful, good-for-nothing relatives,” when Mr. Snagsby cut the horses sharply to the right, perhaps avoiding another vehicle.

A crunching noise followed, and the coach tipped to one side. The viscount lost his balance and fell at Ella’s feet, letting out a shrill cry. She landed on top of him just as the coach tipped back to the other side.

A steady stream of vicious curses punched into Ella’s ears as the viscount caught his balance against the wall of the coach. The vehicle swung over again, tipping in its original direction. “Keep away from me!” her uncle bellowed.

He kicked out and whether he meant to or not, his boot caught Ella’s gown and flung her into the air. She slammed against the opposite wall, then dropped on top of him yet again as the carriage toppled over completely with a crack of splintering wood and the terrible scream of a horse.

“You blithering idiot!” the viscount snarled, throwing her off.

When the door—now in place of the roof—was opened, he shoved her to the side and clutched Mr. Snagsby’s hands.

Ella watched his flailing legs being hauled up and out of the door as she carefully felt her right side. Her ribs felt bruised but didn’t seem to be broken.

She looked down and realized that her gown had been damaged by the viscount’s boot. A rip extended from the hem up to the middle of her thigh.

Mr. Snagsby’s face appeared in the open door, blue sky behind him.

“I don’t think I can leap to your hands,” Ella confessed.

“One minute, Miss. Bill will lift you.”

Their groom hopped down into the carriage, picked her up by the waist, and hoisted her up to the coachman, who brought her to the ground and carefully placed her on her feet.

“How are the horses?” she asked.

“Unnerved but unharmed. You’re quite well?”

“Certainly. I hate to think what could have happened had we somersaulted. You saved us from being seriously injured,” Ella told Mr. Snagsby, trying to ignore the wincing pain in her ribs.

The coachman’s face reddened with pleasure. “We lost a wheel, Miss Ella. No avoiding a crash after that. Luckily, the Mad Bishop is just across the road.”

The viscount strutted up to them. “Your driving was criminal. I’ll be taking the worth of the carriage out of your wages, and I’ll have you put in prison!”

“Those would be the wages you haven’t paid in weeks?” Mr. Snagsby inquired, a hard note in his voice.

“You’ll never see the light of day again!” the viscount snarled. “You may wait here for the constable to collect you.” He strode past Ella. “Come along, girl.”

“Bill, I’ll escort Miss Ella into the inn,” Mr. Snagsby told the groom. “You take care of the horses and get those men to haul the wreck off the road. It isn’t going anywhere, not in a month of Sundays.” Hostlers were pouring out of the Mad Bishop, coming to help.

“Mr. Snagsby, I do apologize for my uncle’s unkind words,” Ella said, as they crossed the street. She discovered that if she breathed shallowly, her ribs scarcely hurt at all.

“You’ll have to forgive me, Miss Ella, but I shall leave the two of you here

in the inn and send Bill home with the horses. I've been offered a place elsewhere, with a man who pays wages when they're due."

"I'm so sorry," Ella said, horribly embarrassed. Not that it was her job to pay the outside staff, but she should have realized her uncle wouldn't bother.

"Not your fault. There's no sign of a ducal carriage," Mr. Snagsby observed as they walked through the inn courtyard.

A few carriages were drawn up to the side, but none of them had a coat of arms on the door. Perhaps the Prince of Wales had cronies willing to carry out his immoral schemes in a discreet fashion.

"I'll bid you farewell here," the coachman said. "You've been a ray of sunshine in this household, Miss, and all of us know it."

"You have been an excellent coachman, Mr. Snagsby. If the viscountess or I can ever give you a reference, please don't hesitate to write."

He nodded. "I'm sorry for your situation, and that's a fact. In case his lordship wishes to send my wages after me—that's a jest!—I'll leave word with Mr. Jarvis."

Ella nodded farewell. Preparing to battle with royalty, she took a deep breath, wincing at the resulting throb from her ribs, and opened the door to the public room.

No dissipated royals were in sight.

Neither was Fulvia.

Instead, a livid duke's daughter was facing off with the viscount.

"Why, Lady Regina!" Ella exclaimed.

Regina flicked her a contemptuous gaze and turned back to his lordship. "You brought household staff?"

The viscount's expression was easy to interpret. He was torn between deference to a duke's daughter and rage over his daughter's downfall. Rage won. "Where is my daughter?" he blustered.

"As I already informed you," Lady Regina said, "Fulvia *was* here. I have no idea where she is now. She and I arrived together—but then she stole my brother's carriage!"

"My daughter stole the Duke of Lennox's carriage?" the viscount exclaimed. "Nonsense! We have a perfectly good coach that is at her disposal."

"She informed me that your coach was a rickety rattletrap that would never take her all the way to Gretna Green." Lady Regina turned away, adjusting her necklace in the mirror over the fireplace so that its diamonds glittered in

the morning sunshine. “She wasn’t the least repentant about leaving me in this hovel,” she tossed over her shoulder.

“Gretna Green!” Ella cried, walking over to stand beside the viscount. “But that’s impossible ... that’s—”

“Poppycock!” her uncle cut in. “No one in the royal family can marry without permission. Look what happened with George IV and Mrs. Fitzherbert. Their marriage was annulled.”

Regina whirled about to face the viscount. “Who said anything about a royal wedding?”

“You mentioned Gretna Green,” he said.

“Fulvia wouldn’t need to steal my brother’s vehicle if she were marrying royalty, would she? Luckily, the duke and duchess are breakfasting in Saltem House. I sent a message, so they will arrive any moment. His Grace can inform you of the worth of his carriage, which is drawn by four matched black horses, by the way. I’m sure you’ll wish to settle your debt immediately.”

“But who is Fulvia marrying?” Ella asked.

“Such a *mésalliance* can scarcely be termed marriage,” Regina sniffed.

To Ella’s mind, any marriage was better than a tumble with the Prince Regent, but her uncle did not agree.

“If Fulvia isn’t with the Regent, then she’ll damn well marry Lord Peregrine,” he huffed.

“You thought she was with the Prince of Wales?” Regina broke into sharp, loud laughter.

How nice that they were keeping her so amused.

Did that count as an Unkind Thought? Surely not.

The viscount was scowling like the tyrant in a book of fairy tales. Clearly it had dawned on him that an imprudent marriage would bring no settlement from Lord Peregrine nor His Majesty.

Instead, he was likely to be asked to pay for an extremely expensive carriage and four matched black horses.

Laboring under the combined weight of emotion and despair, the viscount strode to the sideboard and poured himself a generous shot of whisky.

“Lady Regina, why did you bring Fulvia to this inn?” Ella inquired.

“She told me a Banbury tale,” the lady said, turning back to the mirror and rearranging her diamonds once more.

“What was that?”

Regina threw a needling glance over her shoulder. "I don't explain myself to housekeepers."

The viscount returned, holding a second drink. "Answer the question! Who is the sweltering toad who kidnapped my beautiful, innocent daughter and took her to Gretna Green? I shall be after him with the wrath of God on my side. I shall smite that brimstone scorpion. I shall—"

Regina snorted. "Kidnap *her*? More like the other way around."

"You cannot go after them," Ella informed her uncle. "The coach is smashed, and Mr. Snagsby just left to take up service elsewhere."

"I'll have the constable on him," the viscount snarled.

"She didn't run away with a member of the royal family, I'll tell you that," Regina chortled.

"I shall rent a vehicle and take it to Scotland, before I allow my daughter to throw herself away on a man of no means!" the viscount swore, curling his fist in a way that suggested he envisioned himself on a stage. "I lowered myself, revoked my own standards, when I accepted a mere baron for a son-in-law. Fulvia is the most beautiful woman in London!"

"You'll be looking quite a bit lower than a baron now," Regina said unpleasantly.

Ella was struck by such a burst of dislike for the lady that she couldn't stop herself. "You were Fulvia's *friend*," she cried. "She's only sixteen. You could have stopped her."

"'Friend?'" Fulvia mocked, her expression one of open triumph. "I did think that she would marry Peregrine before shaming him, but it seems she couldn't bear him any more than I could."

"You made friends with Fulvia in order to shame your former fiancé?" Ella asked, stupefied.

"I fancy polite society will be fascinated by the flight of his second fiancée. He didn't even have time to buy her a garish diamond ring." Regina smiled.

Whiskey was overruling the viscount's inherent respect for ducal progeny. "You still haven't answered the question. Who seduced my innocent daughter?" His growl had more than a hint of the violence that led him to slap his wife. "Who played the role of seducer?"

"'Played the role,'" Regina repeated derisively, looking utterly indifferent to his ferocity. "Aye, you might ask *that*."

Ella had a sudden sinking sensation. All those matinee performances ...

But it was even worse than she imagined.

“Imagine my surprise when Fulvia took one of my *grooms* by the hand and informed me that they were bound for Gretna Green—in my brother’s coach, no less!”

CHAPTER TWENTY

IN WHICH FIENNES QUESTIONS HIS MOST DEARLY HELD CONVICTIONS

SALTEM HOUSE ON THE THAMES

MR. AND MRS. BAYTHORN'S ANNUAL *COLLATION AL FRESCO*

Fiennes didn't frequent social "breakfasts," any more than he made appearances at "musicales."

But he arrived home after Fulvia's debut ball realizing that he was at a crossroads.

He needed to talk to the one man whom he knew had chosen his wife for irrational reasons: Jonah, the Duke of Lennox.

After bathing, Fiennes went directly to His Grace's residence, only to find that the duke and duchess had left for Saltem House.

Luckily, Fiennes had been invited to the Baythorn picnic, which explained how he now found himself seated on a blanket—a situation he despised—between a giggling debutante and the Duchess of Lennox.

Beatrice, Jonah's wife, was charming; he would have liked to marry her back when she was Miss Valentine. Interestingly, now he looked at her luscious figure and didn't feel even a twinge of lust.

Bea was exquisite, from her laughing mouth to her curves, but her beauty meant nothing to him.

It was almost alarming.

His fiancée, Fulvia, was accounted one of the beauties of the Season, as had been Regina during her debut. Oddly, all three women left him cold.

"Want to go for a walk?" Jonah said, appearing at his shoulder.

Fiennes rose thankfully, bowed to the ladies, and followed Jonah down the

path that wound along by the Thames.

“I’m too tired to chatter,” Jonah said, throwing himself down on a bench.

“Why?” Fiennes asked, seating himself. Why in the hell would people sprawl on the ground when some clever chap had designed proper outdoor seating?

“Our baby. Sophia.”

Fiennes considered that statement and found the obvious flaw. “Nanny? Nursemaid?”

Jonah snorted. “Wait until you have a baby. We can hear Sophia howling from the nursery a floor above, and believe me, you won’t sleep through it.”

“I shall,” Fiennes stated. “Why don’t you sleep at your club, if the house is too noisy?”

Jonah glanced at him. “Many men likely do.”

He seemed to be offering implicit criticism, but Fiennes couldn’t bring himself to care. “I’m considering engaging in conduct unbecoming of a gentleman,” he said without preface.

Jonah’s eyebrows flew up. “Financial?”

“No.” Fiennes scowled at him. “I would never do that.”

“Then what *would* you do?” Jonah tipped back his head and looked up at the shifting oak leaves overhead.

“I’m thinking of breaking my betrothal.”

“To Miss Fulvia St. Trevelyan? The betrothal that you announced *last night*?” Jonah glanced at Fiennes, sardonic eyebrow in play. “The course of true love never did run smooth, but you are setting records for brief engagements.”

“I do not love her,” Fiennes stated. “I understand she’ll be ruined if I don’t marry her, but I cannot, Jonah. I simply cannot.”

“I see.” Jonah looked back up at the trees. “I like being in love with my wife. That led directly to being in love with my child. Both of which have consequences. I could never leave them and sleep in my club.”

Fiennes paused and then added, “I think I may love her cousin.” He could hear pained wariness in his own voice, but damn it, he had to say it aloud.

“Miss Fenella St. Trevelyan?” Jonah leaned over and bumped his shoulder into Fiennes’s. “Bea told me this morning how much she likes her.”

“I asked Ella to marry me, but I had already arranged things with Fulvia, and last night, when Fulvia started spouting Shakespeare, I realized that I couldn’t break our engagement or she’d be ruined.”

“Are you telling me that you are currently betrothed to *two women*? From the same family?”

Jonah was chuckling, which Fiennes found irritating.

On the other hand, the laughter lines around his friend’s eyes were honest ones—they had appeared after marriage. Jonah had returned from war a pale version of himself, but his duchess had changed everything. Changed Jonah into a man who laughed.

“I am,” Fiennes confirmed. “Informally, in both cases. Neither woman has accepted my proposal. In fact, I never spoke to Fulvia about marriage, although I made an offer to her father. I have not signed the contract offered by the viscount.”

“*Two fiancées!* Three, if you count Lady Regina, and I think we definitely should count her, shouldn’t we?”

Jonah was guffawing now.

“Enough,” Fiennes told him. “I want to marry Ella, not Fulvia. What am I to do? Fulvia almost ruined herself last night, rescued only by my announcement. If I break it off, people will blame it on her performance.”

“Your conundrum boils down to the idiotic rules that govern civilized behavior. Fulvia was an astonishingly good Juliet. Bea talked about it all the way home. Why should acting in a Shakespeare play make a woman unladylike? Moreover, why should a man sacrifice himself and his future happiness to hang on to the hollow title of ‘gentleman?’ ”

Fiennes had no interest in debating civilization’s absurdities. His question was narrow and direct. “Am I right? Will Fulvia’s performance ruin her if I call off the betrothal?”

“To marry Bea, I would have left the dukedom and become a farm laborer. Why do you care if polite society judges you ungentlemanly?”

“I’m not the only person at risk. Fulvia is sixteen and foolish. If I throw her over, she may not find a spouse.”

“That’s actually a good point. Wait a month and throw her over. Her father will sue you for breach of promise.”

“Nothing signed,” Fiennes reminded Jonah. “He can try.”

“If you marry Ella, he’ll be a member of your family.”

Fiennes sighed. “I’ll pay him off, but I can’t wait a month.”

“Why not?”

“St. Trevelyon lost his townhouse at cards last night. To Clod Tyrwhitt, no less.”

“The devil you say!” Jonah responded.

“St. Trevelyon’s a devil, all right,” Fiennes said grimly. “The family has two weeks to move out. Ella is an unpaid servant in that household, and I won’t have her there any longer. I offered to give her a house, but she refused.”

“Well, you are betrothed to her cousin. I see her point.” Jonah frowned. “I just remembered that Bea said something about Ella crying in the ladies’ retiring room. Did you warn her before you made that announcement last night?”

“No,” Fiennes said. “I had to act directly after the performance.” Tension sent a stab of pain down his neck.

“Idiot,” Jonah said. “It would have been better if you’d warned her. Have you thought of asking Ella what to do?”

“I didn’t have time to consult with her.”

“Ask her what you should do,” Jonah said. “You’re going to be married. Even with my slim experience, I can tell you that consulting with your wife-to-be is always a good idea.”

“I can go over there today,” Fiennes said, accepting his advice. “I’ll be damned if I leave Ella in that situation one more day. She’s exhausted, and I don’t care if I have no right to help her.”

“See what she says. But what’s a scandal, after all? I married Bea pretty damn fast, in case you didn’t notice. Had a baby in rapid order. If you don’t pay attention to gossipmongers, they shut their mouths after a while.”

“All right,” Fiennes said. “All right.”

They sat watching the river until Fiennes realized that Jonah had soundlessly fallen asleep. A barge piled high with coal made its ponderous way down the river, weighted so low that no more than a strip of gaily painted deck showed above the water. Two elegantly dressed young gentlemen followed in a canoe, rowing languidly while puffing on pipes.

Fiennes could imagine Ella with a baby. In fact, she already had two babies, Starlight and Josephina, with more on the way. Just how did his girl imagine that she would transport a box of squirrel babies to the country?

The cat, a nauseated viscountess, baby squirrels, trunks, books—not to mention Fiennes, hanging onto the outside of the carriage, perhaps.

He didn’t want to spend even a single night away from Ella, any more than Jonah did Bea and little Sophia. Anything could happen to Ella in the country.

Jonah was napping so soundly that he didn't wake even when his wife ran down from the picnic on the lawn, bearing news that Regina's carriage had been stolen, and they had to rescue her.

"We can leave Jonah to sleep. I'll take you myself," Fiennes said, getting up.

"I suppose we can return for him," Bea said. "Regina is at the Mad Bishop inn. Do you know where that is?"

"Only a few streets away," Fiennes said. "We'll be back before Jonah wakes."

Bea gave Fiennes a rueful smile. "We needn't both be up at night with Sophia, but Jonah never leaves me alone while she's crying."

He took her arm, and they began to walk back up the slope. Bea chattered of the baby while Fiennes let her charm and beauty warm him.

"I believe I'll marry Ella St. Trevelyon," he said abruptly.

"I thought—" Bea cut herself off, and a huge smile crossed her face. "Excellent decision!" she cried.

They had reached the Duke of Lennox's curricule when a bellow stopped them.

"My lord and master has woken," Bea said, laughing. "Did you think that I was running away with Fiennes?" she asked her husband when he arrived.

"What? No!" Still, Jonah took his wife in his arms and kissed her. "Where are we going?"

"To rescue your sister," Fiennes said.

"What's happened to Regina?" Jonah asked with a distinct air of disinterest.

"Lady Regina is stranded not far from here because someone has stolen your coach."

"Not with the blacks as well?" Jonah said, his brow furrowing. "Damn it, why is Regina trundling around London at this hour?"

"The last thing I heard," his wife said, accepting the duke's hand to clamber into the curricule, "she went for a drive with Fulvia St. Trevelyon. They have been spending considerable time together, you know. Regina's note doesn't mention Fulvia, but she must be at the inn as well."

It was true that Regina had been constantly with Fulvia, ever since the night at the theater.

Fiennes would have sworn that Regina despised him with every ounce of her vain being. He had taunted her into rejecting his hand, and most of

London guessed the truth.

So why had she been spending so much time with his betrothed?

“I’ll accompany you,” he said. “You can’t fit more than three into this curricle, so I will accompany Fulvia back to her house in a hackney.”

Which would allow him to break off their engagement.

A mere ten minutes later, they alighted in front of the Mad Bishop. “Isn’t that the St. Trevelyon coach?” Jonah asked. The rattletrap carriage was overturned at the side of the road.

Boys were prancing around it, kicking the splintering wood.

“I hope no one was injured,” Bea commented, hopping down from the curricle without waiting for assistance.

Ella wouldn’t have been in the coach. She was safely at home.

Yet Fiennes headed quickly across the road, walking ahead of the duke and duchess. He pushed open the door to the public room.

She was there.

His heart gave a great thump and settled. Ella was standing beside her uncle. She whirled around when he entered, and their eyes met.

Relief flooded his body. She hadn’t been injured. Instead, she stood in the morning sunshine, so beautiful that his head spun.

Her strawberry hair took on golden highlights, her eyes inky blue and fringed with long lashes, her mouth a delicious raspberry.

She would be his wife. Gratitude filled him. He strode toward her, and she met him halfway.

“Oh, Fiennes,” she whispered. She was biting her lip, eyes huge with shock.

His hands wrapped around her arms. “Are you injured?”

“No. But Fiennes, I’m sorry to tell you—”

“There you are!” Regina called from the front of the room. He turned his head to see her hailing the duke and duchess, who had just entered.

The viscount didn’t bother to turn. “I’ll have his head. I’ll destroy him!”

“Did a groom cause the carriage wreck?” Fiennes asked Ella.

“Fulvia ran away with one of the duke’s grooms! She’s gone to Scotland, to marry him over the anvil.”

Fiennes almost cheered, yet: “I don’t believe it,” he said flatly. “Your cousin would never put herself to the bother and discomfort of traveling to Scotland.”

Ella’s eyes searched his face. “I’m afraid that she has done just that, and

she stole a carriage to do so. Are you disappointed?”

“Bloody hell, *no*,” Fiennes said, allowing a huge smile to take over his face. He caught up one of Ella’s hands and put it to his lips.

She met his eyes and turned pink.

“You’re mine,” he told her, his voice deep with conviction.

“I’ll make this relatively painless, shall I?” Regina announced. “The man wearing my brother’s livery—the man whom Fulvia took to Gretna Green—was not truly a groom.”

“Then who was he?” the Duke of Lennox asked.

“Her future husband has been playing the role of Petruchio on the stage of the Theater Royal.”

The viscount groaned loudly and dropped into a chair, head in his hands.

“That’s right,” Regina said with satisfaction. “Romeo and Juliet have run off together.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

YOU'RE MINE, AND I WON'T GIVE YOU UP.

As soon as the Duke and Duchess of Lennox escorted an irritable Lady Regina away, Fiennes turned to Ella and said, "I'll bring you home."

"I don't believe I've ever seen that expression on your face," Ella said wonderingly.

"Giddy?" He bent his head and kissed her.

"Fiennes! My uncle might see you!"

They both turned to look, but the viscount was otherwise occupied. He had grabbed the brandy and was industriously drinking his way to the bottom of the decanter.

"He can make his own way home," Fiennes growled. He escorted Ella out the door of the inn, took out a coin, and tossed it to the ostler. "A carriage to the St. Trevelyon residence in Chelsea."

The man ran to the finest carriage in the innyard and opened the door. "If you please, my lord."

The viscount trudged dispiritedly from the inn, walked straight to the carriage, and got in.

"He'll always take advantage," Ella said in a low voice.

Fiennes dropped a kiss on her nose. "Leave your uncle to me."

"He won't like the fact that you ... Are you certain you wish to marry me?"

About to hand her into the carriage, Fiennes paused, a flicker of pain in his eyes. "You don't trust me?"

Ella realized that she was holding her breath and let it out. "You asked me to marry you, and then you announced your betrothal to another woman in the same week."

"I thought that the ball would establish Fulvia as the Season's diamond," Fiennes said. "I planned to back away once she was besieged by suitors. I was forced to announce the betrothal, but even so—and against every ethical

rule I was taught—I had already decided to break our engagement this morning.”

Ella blinked at him. “You were going to jilt her? But that’s ... that’s not *gentlemanly*.”

“I don’t give a damn.” He moved closer, arms wrapping around her. “You’re mine, Ella. I won’t give you up.”

When they stopped kissing, Fiennes added in a gruff voice, “I came with Jonah and Bea, planning to end the betrothal, because I refuse to sacrifice our happiness, no matter what society dictates. No matter whether your cousin is ruined.”

“Luckily, she’s not. No, she is, but there’s nothing you can do about it.”

Fiennes’s eyes warmed, and he pulled her even closer. “I thought Fulvia’s declarations of love as Juliet were surprisingly believable. Of course, she was talking to her own Romeo.”

Ella didn’t see her uncle look out of the carriage door: every bit of her attention was focused on the slide of Fiennes’s tongue against hers, the way his breath caught, the rasp of a moan in the back of his throat.

So she startled when a rough shout came from the carriage. “What are you doing? Hands off my housekeeper!”

Fiennes raised his head with a deadly glare. “Ella is your niece and my future wife.”

“Hoity-toity!” her uncle retorted. “As far as I’m concerned, you are still betrothed to my daughter. In fact, why aren’t you setting out on the road to Gretna Green to recover Fulvia? She’s been *stolen* by a lowborn rogue!”

Fiennes ignored him, dropping a last kiss on Ella’s lips before he helped her into the carriage. He sat down so closely that his leg pressed against hers.

Ella caught her skirt just before it fell open down the ripped seam and exposed her thigh.

“I’ll sue you for breach of promise,” the viscount promised, throwing himself on the opposite seat. “You *may not* marry my niece. I need her to be my housekeeper and to care for her aunt.”

A bitter taste came into Ella’s mouth. She had never been able to defend herself before, because she had nowhere to go if her uncle threw her out. But now someone else cared for her.

She and Fiennes would make a home together.

She took a deep breath and straightened her back. “I am no longer your unpaid housekeeper. You fired me last night, remember?”

Her uncle sneered. “You think you can tell me what to do, girl, while you’re wearing my housekeeping keys?”

“I kept house for you because I was orphaned, but also out of the goodness of my heart,” Ella said. “For love of your wife and Fulvia.”

“You kept house for me because your father didn’t care enough to ensure your future!”

Fiennes leaned forward. “I trust you recall that I knocked you out last night?”

The viscount narrowed his eyes. “I will never forget that affront, though I was kind enough not to apprise the duke and duchess of your disgracefully violent behavior!”

“My disgrace?” Fiennes snorted. “You are an abusive monster.”

“My father *did* provide for me,” Ella stated. “You burned his will and stole my inheritance.”

An ugly peal of laughter rang through the carriage. “I never saw his will because there wasn’t one.” The viscount’s lip curled in an ugly sneer. “I’m not saying that I wouldn’t have burned it, but I didn’t have to bother. You’re nurturing a false memory of my brother if you tell yourself he gave a damn, because he didn’t. All he wanted was an heir.”

Ella had spent years negotiating a household headed by this monster, as Fiennes called him. She could tell when the viscount was lying.

He was *not* lying.

The truth jolted through her. The viscount had not burned a will.

Yet that didn’t mean that her father hadn’t provided for her.

She had seen the will, and so had Jarvis.

Thankfully, the carriage was rocking to a halt. “You go after Fulvia and rescue her from that actor,” her uncle snapped at Fiennes, “or I’ll spread the word that you debauched my innocent child, leading her to take her own life!”

Fiennes laughed as he pushed open the door to the carriage. “Come, Ella.” He jumped out, reached back in, and caught her up in her arms.

Before she could stop herself, she let out a little cry.

He placed her carefully on the ground. “What hurts?”

“My ribs are sore.”

“Where?”

Ella put her hand on her right side, just below her breast. “They aren’t broken.”

“Move to the side,” the viscount bellowed.

Not taking his eyes from Ella’s face, Fiennes reached out and slammed the carriage door shut, flicking down the handle that locked the door.

Ignoring the pounding that made the whole carriage shudder, Fiennes asked softly, “May I?”

When Ella nodded, Fiennes ran his fingers carefully over her side. “I think you’re right, but I am no expert.” He dusted her nose with a kiss. “I’ll send for a doctor.” Looking up at the coachman, he said, “You may let him out now.”

The man hopped down and opened the carriage door. The viscount stumbled out and fell to his knees on the dusty sidewalk.

“You’re fired!” he screamed.

The coachman looked at him impassively, arms folded over his chest. “I work for the Mad Bishop. You’re the owner of that pile of junk just outside the inn. You’ll need to pay to have that hauled away.”

Ella didn’t dare look for fear she’d burst out laughing. Snugly tucked against Fiennes’s side, she felt safe.

Unafraid.

The emotion felt new and green, like a spring leaf uncurling on a bough, making her realize that unbeknownst to herself, she had been tightly coiled with fear ever since her parents died.

“Isn’t that the Duke of Lennox’s carriage?” Fiennes asked, pulling Ella’s thoughts away from her memories.

A magnificent barouche, painted dark crimson with an elaborate coat of arms on the door, was drawn up outside the St. Trevelyon townhouse. Matched black horses stamped their feet impatiently.

“I don’t understand,” Ella exclaimed. “Why isn’t it on its way to Greta Green?”

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

IN WHICH FULVIA SURPRISES ALMOST EVERYONE

“Lady Regina was lying,” the viscount snarled as he pushed past Ella and Fiennes, slapping dust from his thigh. “My daughter would never steal a coach. The whole tale was nothing more than a ... taradiddle! My daughter—the daughter of a viscount—would never lower herself to marry an actor.”

Ella’s heart skipped a beat. She stole a glance at Fiennes.

“I don’t give a damn if Fulvia falls on her knees begging to marry me. As God’s my witness, I will never marry any woman other than you.”

She managed a smile. “You’re quite certain?”

“I don’t care whether your cousin is ruined or not, or whether that makes me a bastard and not a gentleman. I don’t give a damn about anything, Ella, except you.”

Before Ella could come up on her toes to kiss him, the front door of the St. Trevelyon townhouse opened. Jarvis bowed and backed into the house.

Before the viscount reached the white marble steps, Fulvia walked out the door, arm-in-arm with Mr. Woodward.

Even dressed in a suit of livery that must belong to the Duke of Lennox, the actor was clearly recognizable: his elegant features had graced placards advertising *Romeo and Juliet* all over London.

For her part, Fulvia was wearing a walking gown of pale lemon adorned with a wide swath of violet silk around the bodice and hem. The neckline was low and the skirts scandalously high; as Fulvia started down the steps, her ankles were charmingly framed by a violet ruffle.

As with all of Mrs. Quimby’s garments, her gown had more than a touch of drama, especially when Fulvia twirled a matching silk parasol adorned with tassels.

Fulvia was always beautiful, but there was a flush on her cheeks and a glow in her eyes that Ella thought likely matched her own.

Though she realized with a wince that her shabby, brown garment hardly

matched her cousin's, even if she hadn't been clutching her torn skirt so as not to expose her legs to the entire street.

Fiennes bent his head and murmured in her ear, "Will you be heartbroken if I admit that I'd prefer you in a gown that covered at least the half of your breasts?"

"Is that the knave?" her father screeched, charging forward. "I'll make you into a eunuch, you blackguard!"

Ella didn't move. Tucked against the warmth and strength of Fiennes's body, she felt as if she were watching a play.

Her cousin walked down two steps, bringing her Romeo with her. "Well met, Father," she said sweetly, stopping at a level that left her gazing down at the man.

The viscount scowled at the actor. "You pirate! You pig-headed swindler who seduced my daughter!"

Mr. Woodward's expression didn't change. He regarded the irate peer with a genial smile.

"You're an abductor, a Viking," his lordship shouted, spittle flying from his lips. "I'll have you in court, you ruffian!"

"No, you won't," his daughter said, drawing on a pair of purple gloves.

"You won't get to Gretna Green. Your fiancé is standing before you, you stupid turnip of a girl! You don't think Lord Peregrine will let you go?"

"That is absolutely what I think," Fulvia said. Her eyes flickered over Ella's face, then to Fiennes. "Third time lucky," she said to him, smiling.

Turning back to her father, she said, "The betrothal you arranged is irrelevant, Father. Thomas and I married by special license this morning."

Viscount St. Trevelyon gasped. "Special license! You couldn't marry without my permission. You're underage!"

"I forged your signature," his daughter said dispassionately.

"A lowly actor could never afford such a special license," the viscount said, obviously grasping at straws.

"Oh, he didn't," Fulvia said cheerfully. "I sold Ella's pearl circlet to pay for it. I do apologize, Ella. Mr. Havers, of Havers & Rouver, promised faithfully that he would hold it for a week so that you can buy it back, Lord Peregrine."

Ella blinked. "How could you know that Fiennes would do such a thing for me?"

"I'm very observant. I saw the way he looked at you," her cousin said.

Fiennes grinned at her. “You did, did you?”

“Under the circumstances, I thought it was terribly kind of you to save my reputation last night. But I decided to marry Thomas anyway.”

They all looked at her husband, who smiled, but seemed to feel no compulsion to speak.

“My son-in-law is a turnip,” the viscount moaned. “Without a feather to fly with, what’s more.”

“I came home in order to introduce my husband to Mother,” Fulvia said, a certain hardness entering her voice. “We are leaving. My maid is packing my trunks and will follow later. Ella, I trust that you will care for my mother’s health and well-being? She has taken to her bed, prostrated by my news, I’m afraid.”

Fiennes stiffened. “Ella is no longer—”

Ella elbowed him. “Of course I will.”

“Thank you.” Fulvia gave them both a serene smile.

“But where are you going?” Ella asked.

“Are you intending to take the Duke of Lennox’s carriage?” Fiennes added.

His voice was mild, but Ella thought about elbowing him again.

“No,” Fulvia said. “The theater has sent a carriage for us. Perhaps you could arrange to have that vehicle returned to His Grace.” She tucked her hand into her silent husband’s elbow and strolled down the last few steps.

“How dare you simply marry and—and do as you wish?” the viscount bawled.

“Because,” Fulvia said over her shoulder as she walked toward a glossy black carriage, “I’m your daughter.”

The last thing Ella saw was Mr. Woodward’s pleasant face, composed in a “farewell” expression as he waved from the carriage door.

“That was extraordinarily odd,” Fiennes said, under his breath.

“Brandy,” the viscount groaned. “Ella, you’ll pay for—” Catching Fiennes’s glance, he broke off and stomped up the marble steps.

Jarvis immediately stepped forward, pulling the door of the townhouse open. He stood back and the viscount walked past him without a word.

“Miss Ella?” the butler asked.

“I will say farewell to Lord Peregrine, Jarvis, and come inside in a minute.”

“The hell you’ll say goodbye,” Fiennes told her. “You don’t believe that

I'd leave you alone in company with that brute, do you?"

Jarvis's face was as close to smiling as possible given his naturally dignified countenance. He retreated into the house and closed the door.

Ella shook her head. "You must leave, Fiennes. I cannot canoodle all day. Until we marry, I'm still the housekeeper."

"You can canoodle as much as you wish," he told her, running fingers along her jaw. "You're mine now, darling. My family, mine to care for. The only thing you need to worry about is how you wish to transport Josephina and her babies to my house tomorrow. And Starlight, of course."

"I couldn't leave that soon!" Ella gasped.

Fiennes's eyes were dark and intense. "If Hardwicke's Act of Marriage didn't ban marriages in the afternoon, we'd be in a church this minute. As of tomorrow morning's ceremony, you live with me."

"But my aunt! You saw how he ... I knew my uncle shouted at her, but I'd never before seen him strike her." Ella shivered, her hands curling around Fiennes's upper arms. "My uncle is violent, Fiennes."

"Lady St. Trevelyon will move in with us. You both must leave this house, remember? Your uncle has gambled away the leasehold."

She *had* forgotten.

Ella's mind reeled thinking of everything that had to be done. She hadn't counted on Fulvia for much, but now her cousin wouldn't be there to help her mother.

"If you'll excuse me, darling," Fiennes said. "Jonah will be happy to know his vehicle hasn't been stolen." He gave the coachman from the Mad Bishop another coin, sending him back to the inn, and walked over to His Grace's carriage.

Ella watched him absently, thinking about her cousin and Thomas Woodward, as Fiennes chatted with the Duke of Lennox's coachman.

"Why was Woodward dressed as a groom?" Ella asked when Fiennes returned.

"One of the duke's grooms was bribed to lend his livery to Woodward, which meant that Regina unknowingly brought Fulvia's groom with her to the inn, which is next door to the Doctor's Commons."

"Where one buys marriage licenses," Ella exclaimed.

"Exactly. Fulvia sent Woodward to the Commons, wearing the duke's livery, to buy a blank license, which never would be sold to someone outside the nobility. Woodward, of course, said that he was acting on the part of His

Grace.”

“Very clever,” Ella said. She really had underestimated Fulvia’s resourcefulness.

“Once Woodward returned to the inn, Fulvia disclosed her plan to Regina. Then she emerged from the inn, false groom in tow, and demanded to be taken to a chapel, and from there to her residence. The coachman obeyed.”

Ella digested that. “But why would he go anywhere without Lady Regina?”

“Her ladyship ordered him to take Fulvia anywhere she wished.”

Ella gasped. “Regina lied!”

Fiennes shrugged. “Are you surprised?”

“I suppose not. You never believed that Fulvia had fled to Gretna Green.”

“I have known your cousin long enough to respect her ability to get what she wants. Five days in a coach, even one belonging to a duke, would be uncomfortable and expensive. In any event, I don’t want to talk about your cousin, but about us. How do you feel about kissing on the street?”

Ella shook her head. “That’s worse than kissing in an innyard. No gentleman would do such a thing.”

“Luckily I’m no gentleman.” Fiennes’s mouth covered hers, his hands pulling her closer. Then he was devouring her, his kiss hungry and demanding.

When Ella was light-headed, blood surging through her veins like pure sunlight, he pulled back and said, “I’ve never truly asked you the question, Ella. Will you marry me?”

Time suspended. Ella stopped hearing carriages rumble by in the street, even the drumbeat of her own heart. Fiennes was looking down at her, cheekbones tight and eyes ...

Anxious?

No. Not anxious. But his gaze wasn’t entirely confident. There wasn’t a trace of the insolent arrogance with which he normally sauntered through a room.

That look in his eyes now? It was hers, only for her.

She felt it instinctively, in her gut.

“Ella,” he whispered.

“I’m in love with you,” she said simply. “Of course, I’ll marry you.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

BABIES!

Ella led the way up the last flight of stairs to her attic, clutching her ripped skirt so that not even a glimpse of her knee could be seen. She shouldn't allow Fiennes into her room, not when she was in such a disheveled state.

Even given that they were getting married.

It wasn't proper.

Fiennes *was* a gentleman. Still, in the carriage when she had unthinkingly allowed her skirt to fall open, he had given her bare knee a molten glance.

"You may greet Josephina, but then you must depart," she said over her shoulder.

"I'm not leaving you alone in this house," Fiennes stated. A lazy ferocity in his voice told her that there was no point in arguing. In truth, she had become slightly—just slightly—afraid of her uncle.

"I shall join you downstairs shortly, so that I can begin to make arrangements for our move," she said, implicitly giving in.

"I shall bring my butler and footmen to help Jarvis tomorrow. There's no need for you to bother about anything."

He was such a man.

The complexities of dissolving a household were overwhelming: Where would the furniture go? What about her father's books? She had little clothing, but what of her mother's rocking chair and the contents of the nursery? She couldn't imagine bringing up that delicate subject.

"Perhaps Josephina's babies came while we were gone," Ella said, pushing open the attic door. "I couldn't coax her out of her nest this morning."

"That squirrel couldn't get much rounder," Fiennes remarked, walking in behind her.

"I left Starlight curled up outside the nest, as if she were keeping Josephina company." Ella turned around and discovered Fiennes grinning at her. His eyes were mischievous.

Wicked, even. Anticipatory.

Desirous.

“Not that I’m unexcited by the prospect of squirrel babies,” he said, strolling toward her, “but you do realize that we are marrying tomorrow morning?” He paused and added with obvious reluctance, “Unless you’d rather wait for the pomp and circumstance in St. Paul’s Cathedral.”

“Not particularly.” Ella shook her head.

“I’ve already sent a groom to buy a license. He’ll have a priest waiting for us at eight in the morning tomorrow.”

She cleared her throat. “I do not—” She stopped, unable to construct the right sentence.

“I do not plan to consummate a marriage that we haven’t consecrated in a narrow attic bed,” Fiennes told her, sounding amused.

“Of course not,” she said hurriedly.

He took a last step that brought their bodies together. “May I kiss you?”

Ella swallowed hard, looking up at Fiennes’s sculpted face. Sun was pouring in the window, and Starlight was winding around both of their feet, purring in a way that suggested she would like a sausage roll. The world felt ...

It felt *safe*.

His hands settled so gently on her back that she could hardly feel them.

“Why me?” she blurted out. “I’m nothing special. Just a girl, a girl in an attic, moreover.”

“Just a girl.” His eyes were alight with laughter. “One of the most beautiful girls I’ve ever seen.”

She shook her head, a kernel of disappointment in her heart at his praise. “Fulvia is far more beautiful.”

Fiennes ran a finger over her lower lip. “Do you really not see yourself, Ella?”

She put her hands on his chest, spreading her fingers to feel the uncompromising breadth of his body. “I find myself uninteresting.”

“Your features are exquisite, and your hair has me dreaming of amber ringlets. But it’s what’s in your eyes that makes you far more exquisite than Fulvia. Your sense of humor and your intelligence. The way you fence with me without giving a damn about my fortune.” He frowned. “You have never even tried to flirt with me, have you?”

He almost sounded offended, so Ella smiled. “I don’t know how.”

“Look at me as if you’d like to be kissed,” Fiennes said, his voice dropping an octave. “Show me that you want *me*, not my name or my fortune or my title.”

Ella slid her hands slowly up his chest, over his shoulders, around his neck. “You said that you can read my eyes.”

He nodded.

“What do they say now?”

His mouth covered hers, sending pleasure shuddering through her body. She gasped, and his tongue swept in to taste her.

Which meant she could taste him. He was better than any delicacy she could imagine.

“Your lower lip is enchanting,” he groaned, pulling back.

Ella squinted at Fiennes, realizing she could read his eyes too. Her breath hitched at the intent look in them. He wanted her. He wanted to make her body sing with desire.

He was succeeding.

Her hands shook as she ran her fingers down his neck, feeling thick muscle shifting under her fingers. She knew, deep inside, that Fiennes was hers in an intrinsic way: in her blood and bones, in her heart.

Since her parents died, she had learned to live alone, to love Josephina and Starlight. She had never allowed herself to envision being loved.

“Ella.” His voice was a rumble coming from deep in his chest. “Tell me what you want, anything you want, and I’ll give it to you.”

“A hug,” she whispered. His big arms tightened around her as he tucked her into the curve of his warm body.

“I’d like to give you a great deal more than that.”

“You’ll have to,” she said, fidgeting with embarrassment. “Apart from a few garments supplied by Mrs. Quimby, I bring nothing to our marriage.”

The flare in Fiennes’s eyes made up for the humiliation Ella felt to be entering a marriage with scarcely more than the clothing she wore.

“I’d prefer it if you were naked,” he said, dropping a kiss on the corner of her mouth. “You could wear one of my shirts to breakfast. Nothing to bed, of course.”

“Fiennes!”

“Actually, you do bring a lot to our marriage. Starlight and presumably a litter of squirrels, since there’s no sign of Mrs. Josephina.”

At the sound of her name, Starlight meowed so loudly that Ella saw every

one of her pointed white teeth.

“You are very demanding,” Fiennes told the cat. He fished in his coat. “Here you are.”

“I can’t believe you had a sausage,” Ella said, leaning against him as Starlight dragged the sausage under the bed where she could nibble it in privacy. “Is that from your breakfast?”

He nodded. “I also have two candied violets for the expecting mother.”

She narrowed her eyes. “Are you generally this friendly to animals?”

“No.”

Ella raised an eyebrow.

“I don’t know how to flirt either,” Fiennes said, his eyes glinting with mischief. “Besides, I like *your* animals. I had already decided to marry you when I met Josephina, but she would have been a powerful inducement. Better than a dowry.”

“Thank goodness you don’t need a dowry.”

“If I had been chasing a fortune, I wouldn’t have considered Fulvia. And if I hadn’t courted Fulvia, I wouldn’t have met you.”

“Although you also wouldn’t have told an entire ballroom that you meant to marry Fulvia,” Ella pointed out.

“Thinking back, the moment I saw your eyes I realized I couldn’t go through with it. It merely took me a day to acknowledge it.”

“Fulvia is truly ruined now, isn’t she?” Ella asked. The horrifying truth couldn’t be avoided.

“Yes, she is. There is no place for your cousin in polite society.”

Ella thought about that. “I don’t think she’ll mind.”

“I agree. I don’t think Fulvia gives a damn about being ruined,” Fiennes said. “I hesitate to impugn your aunt, but she did not set a good example. We’re lucky Fulvia married the fellow.”

The truth felt like a leaden weight in Ella’s chest. “But how will she live? Actors can’t be paid very well.”

“Oh, we’ll support them,” Fiennes said cheerfully. “Adding up everything you bring to the marriage: a few garments, a cat, some squirrels, an indigent actress and her husband, and an adulterous aunt, if you don’t mind my bluntness.”

Ella started giggling. “I am definitely not a good bargain.”

“It’s a good thing that you’re so desirable that I would give everything I own to marry you.”

They didn't stop kissing until Fiennes shifted his hand to run down her arm and accidentally caught the bruise her uncle left. One of them.

She flinched.

"Damn carriage accident," he muttered, leaning down to kiss the blue-black bruise, and then the second one, on her forearm. "Tomorrow, I shall kiss your ribs," he said, straightening. Then his brows knit. "Wait. How did you get this one?"

"The accident is all a blur," Ella told him, shrugging.

If she confessed the truth, Fiennes would go downstairs and wallop her uncle, but she wouldn't put it past the viscount to do something nefarious in return. Something secretive and evil.

"Josephina!" she cried, changing the subject. "I can't believe we haven't checked her nest."

"Yes," Fiennes said slowly.

She walked over to crouch next to Mrs. Quimby's hatbox, lying on its side. Josephina had constructed a beautiful nest from soft bits of fabric, a few leaves, and even some pieces of parchment she'd found and chewed into moon shapes.

As Ella popped her head down to the entrance, she saw Josephina curled in a tight circle. "Hello, Joe," she whispered. "Are you alone in there?"

Josephina's eyes gleamed at her from the dusky nest. Then she uncurled just enough so that Ella could see one sweet little head nestled beneath her, eyes shut tight.

"Oh, Fiennes," she breathed. "Babies!"

His big warm body crouched down beside her. Ella leaned against him, loving the citrusy smell of his starched linen—well, citrus with a touch of sausage.

Fiennes carefully took a candied violet and set it near Josephina's head. She didn't move.

"Perhaps sweets aren't the right thing to eat at the moment," Ella said. "Back home, the stableboys make special mash for mares."

"Good thought," Fiennes said, taking back the violet. "What shall we give her?"

"I have her favorite nuts." Ella got up and went over to the tin box where she kept squirrel food.

"Here's a hazelnut," Ella told Josephina a moment later. "Here, I'll give you a plate. You can eat it at your leisure." She plucked a piece of parchment

from the nest and put the nut on top.

“Wait a minute,” Fiennes said.

Ella raised an eyebrow.

“First of all,” Fiennes said, his voice having taken on that rolling growl that she was coming to know, “I’d like to just say that your leg is exquisite.”

Ella looked down with a gasp. Her skirt had fallen apart, and her plump thigh gleamed like fresh cream in the sunshine.

“And second, look at this, Ella. Where is it from?”

Fiennes handed her a second piece of parchment, also taken from the nest. She turned it over, frowning. “I’m not sure where Josephina found the parchment, but it seems soft and thick, so I didn’t worry about it. She may have carried the pieces up the tree, which suggests she was in the library, chewing on my uncle’s papers.” She smiled ruefully at Fiennes. “I didn’t try to stop her, which is very wrong of me. An Unkind Deed, to go along with Unkind Thoughts.”

“It reads ‘In the name of God, a—’”

“Perhaps ‘amen,’ ” Ella said, trying to sound interested. She gave him back the scrap of paper and peered at Josephina again. “Normally she would have leapt on the hazelnut immediately.”

“I expect she’ll eat it once we are on the other side of the room. She’s protecting her babies. Ella, have you ever seen a will?”

Ella made an incredulous sound in the back of her throat. “You must be joking!”

“This looks like the opening of a will. See how the top edge is smooth, and then the writing begins just to the left?”

“Josephina chewed up my father’s will?”

“I think so.”

She let out a choked giggle. “Luckily, it doesn’t matter, does it? After all, my uncle gambled away this house, and I’m afraid the Northern estate has fallen to ruin.”

“I think Josephina chewed off pieces around the side and top,” Fiennes said. “I don’t see any parchment covered with writing.”

“Are you saying that we might still find the will?” Ella’s voice was thick, even to her own ears.

“Perhaps.” He tentatively reached out a finger. Josephina didn’t flinch as he rubbed the top of her head in the way she liked. “Perhaps not. Maybe she ate it up, in some odd squirrel mating ritual. Would you feel terrible if this

house turns out to have been yours all along, but your uncle had gambled it away before you had possession? We might be able to buy it from Clod Tyrwhitt.”

“I don’t want you to pay for my father’s house,” Ella said.

Fiennes moved to sit on the floor, lifting her onto his lap. “Please notice that I am pulling your skirts closed rather than running my hand up your leg,” he whispered in her ear.

Ella leaned her head against his chest. “I don’t feel terrible,” she said, a little surprised. “I do love the house, and my parents were happy here, but I’d rather forget the last few weeks.”

Fiennes held up the scrap of paper. “You said your father wrote out the will himself?”

She nodded.

He gave her the scrap and closed her fingers around it. “Your uncle was talking shite when he said that your father didn’t plan for your future. Josephina has given you proof.”

Ella swallowed hard and rubbed her cheek against him. “My father would have loved you.”

Together they watched as the new mother checked all her babies, giving each one a motherly lick before curling up with them again.

“Do you want children?” Fiennes asked.

Ella’s heart beat faster. Children, like love, was something she’d never allowed herself to imagine. “Yes,” she whispered. “Yes, I do.”

His arms tightened. “I never felt any particular desire for them, to be honest. I knew I had to have an heir.”

“I suppose ...” Ella began uncertainly.

“I want *your* children,” Fiennes said hoarsely. He buried his face in her curls. “God help me, Ella, I want as many babies of yours as there are squirrels in that nest.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

DISCOVERIES, OF MORE THAN ONE KIND

Since her uncle was not home, and her aunt had remained in her chamber, Ella and Fiennes dined alone in the small dining room.

As Jarvis was preparing the sweet course, Ella eyed Fiennes. He had to go home. It was ridiculous to think that she needed protection, sweet though his impulse was.

But when she brought it up, Fiennes flatly refused.

Ella raised an eyebrow. “Presumably you wish to bathe and change clothing before we marry?”

“A salient point,” Fiennes said thoughtfully.

“I’ve lived with my uncle for years without harm. He’s not even here!”

True, the viscount had left the house the moment Fiennes descended the stairs from the attic.

“He must not have liked my expression,” Fiennes had told Ella, who stayed upstairs to change her ripped gown. “I have the sort of face that some people find objectionable.”

She giggled, thinking of her uncle’s flight, and then added, “The viscount won’t be home until the wee hours. Don’t you need to fetch the marriage license?”

Fiennes shook his head. “My grooms have been coming and going all day arranging for the move. I have the license in my pocket. The priest is laid on for eight a.m.”

“Must we be quite so expeditious?”

“It’s not just that I want you to be my wife,” Fiennes said. “I don’t trust your uncle. I’m taking away both his unpaid housekeeper and his wife, since your aunt will leave with us.”

“She *is* carrying another man’s child.”

“No one knows that. From the world’s point of view, he’s a virile man who may have finally fathered an heir, if the child is a boy, that is.”

Ella wrinkled her nose and leaned closer. "Has my aunt said anything to you about wishing to return to the country?"

"We haven't spoken of the subject."

"I thought she would want to see the vicar. You know, the *father*."

There was a clatter at the sideboard.

Fiennes glanced at Jarvis. "My point is that I don't wish to leave you in this house alone."

"Well, I don't wish to marry an unwashed man," Ella said, laughing.

His husky laugh sent tingles down her legs. "That is persuasive. I do have a few things to do before welcoming my bride to my house."

Jarvis stepped forward with plates holding chocolate tart.

"Did I tell you that Jarvis has kindly agreed to join our household?" Fiennes asked.

Ella's face lit up. "That's marvelous!"

"You may also invite any other members of this household whom you consider valuable," Fiennes told the butler.

"Thank you, my lord," Jarvis said, bowing. "I have already discussed the matter with your butler. Fortunately, being that it was heretofore a bachelor establishment, your household will need to expand upon marriage. Lord St. Trevelyon had few servants left, but those will fit nicely into your household."

"I'll cover any unpaid wages," Fiennes said easily.

"What will happen with two butlers?" Ella asked. "I certainly wouldn't wish to see you demoted, Jarvis."

"I am acquiring a country estate," Fiennes said. "Jarvis assures me that he will be happy to take control of it."

Ella beamed at her fiancé. "You are our fairy godmother. Jarvis vastly prefers the country."

"That is true, Miss Fenella," Jarvis said. And then he added, bowing, "I am most grateful to Lord Peregrine."

"I am not a fairy godmother," Fiennes pointed out. "That lady had a wand, and I have only sovereigns."

"Which seem magical to me," Ella said frankly. "After being poor for so long."

When the meal was over, Fiennes insisted on walking her upstairs. "I must know how the youngest members of our household are faring," he said, his eyes dancing under the fan of his lashes.

“No kissing,” Ella told him. “I mean it.”

“Never, if you don’t wish it,” he replied.

She walked up the stairs before him, aware that her body strongly disagreed with the rules of propriety her mother had taught her—but that memory steadied her. No matter how inviting Fiennes’s gaze might be, she would follow her mother’s precepts.

She didn’t lean into him when they both crouched before Josephina’s nest. She didn’t melt when he cradled Starlight against his chest and scratched her cat under the chin.

She didn’t throw herself into his arms when he smiled at her.

After a few minutes, Fiennes stood up and looked around the bare room, frowning. “Jarvis will bring a proper bath for you in a few minutes.”

“A bath,” Ella said happily.

“You did show some concern about my bathing, so I thought I would return the compliment,” he pointed out. “Those books are your father’s, aren’t they?”

Ella nodded. “Jarvis has promised he will pack them himself. It’s likely that my uncle will never realize that they’re gone. He used to laugh at my father for being a reader.”

“What a fool,” Fiennes said absently. He strode over to her bed and began picking up the volumes and glancing at the titles.

“Are you looking for anything in particular?” Ella asked, coming to his side. “These books are mostly literature, as my uncle considered them more saleable.”

“Is there a copy of *Hamlet* in the bunch?”

“Yes! It’s a very early edition, so it’s likely worth something.”

“May I see it, Ella?”

She frowned at him, puzzled. “Certainly. I stacked the Shakespeare plays together, thinking I would offer them to Fulvia. They’re over there, next to the wall.”

Fiennes took the stack as a whole and turned the volumes on their sides so he could read the titles. He picked up the thin volume marked *Hamlet*, turned it upside down, and shook it.

Nothing happened.

“Books need to be treated more gently,” Ella protested. “Did you think my father’s will might be inside? My father surely didn’t imagine his brother as King Claudius, dripping poison in his ear.”

Fiennes cocked an eyebrow. “Are you certain? Jarvis tells me that your father was a sagacious fellow who grasped his brother’s shortcomings.”

“When did you find time to discuss that subject with Jarvis?”

“This morning, while you were changing your gown, and I was guarding the staircase to the attic. Wait a minute. I slept through *King Lear* in school, but a few details were drummed into my unwilling head. Didn’t Lear write a will, leaving his property to his daughters?” He picked up another volume.

Ella had just enough time to realize it was a copy of *King Lear* before Fiennes shook it violently.

A folded piece of paper fell out.

Ella caught it in mid-air.

Clearly, the parchment had originally been larger than the book, but it had been nibbled until it was the same length and width as the Shakespeare volume. Crescents had disappeared from the top, the bottom, and one side.

She knew her father’s writing.

Half of the salutation was gone, but most of the document was untouched. She swallowed hard.

Fiennes straightened and put an arm around her shoulder. They read it together. Her mother had been given the estate for her use during her lifetime. Unfortunately, she died at the scene of the crash.

The next paragraph bequeathed the late viscount’s London house to his dear daughter Fenella absolutely, along with stocks and bonds that her uncle undoubtedly wasted long ago. The Northern estate was left to her children.

Her uncle, her father’s only sibling, received nothing. But her aunt was given a ruby necklace, with the proviso that she save it as a dowry for her daughter, Fulvia. Under no circumstances was it to be sold.

Ella’s eyes pricked with tears. Her father had tried to safeguard her future, even thinking of Fulvia. Alas, that ruby necklace had been sold long ago. Her mother’s jewelry had disappeared from her bedchamber the very day that the viscount took possession of the house.

Gentle, strong arms lifted her against Fiennes’s chest. He sat down on the edge of the bed. “I’m sorry, darling. I’m only kissing your hair. That doesn’t break your no-kissing ban.”

Ella leaned her head against his warm chest and listened to the steady thump of his heart. She didn’t need this house, and her children wouldn’t need the Northern estate.

All she needed was here, in the attic.

A few peaceful minutes later, Jarvis knocked on the door, ushering in footmen carrying a proper bathtub, rather than Ella's small tin tub.

Fiennes gave Josephina an acorn, then kissed Ella's hand in farewell as the footmen were filling the tub with steaming lemon-scented water. "Until morning," he said, his low voice a promise.

The viscountess's own maid, Alice, entered carrying two snowy white towels and a bar of the viscountess's best soap.

"I'm here to help you bathe," Alice said, smiling as Jarvis and the footmen left.

"This is a change, isn't it?" Ella asked, somewhat astounded.

"Lord Peregrine is *that* handsome," the maid said with a naughty twinkle. "We're all half in love with him, Miss. He came downstairs into the kitchen and handed out sovereigns to celebrate your wedding day tomorrow!"

With Alice's help, Ella stripped off her dingy gown and climbed into the bathtub. The maid carefully washed her hair in sweet-smelling chamomile soap before rinsing it with fresh water.

Ella happily sunk down in the bath and watched drowsily as Alice bustled about the attic, straightening up the books and chattering about moving arrangements.

When the water cooled, Alice returned. She checked her step and gently tapped the bruise on Ella's forearm. "I didn't know he pinched you as well, Miss. I'm sorry."

Ella sat up. "It was the first time. I had no idea he did such a thing to the maids!"

"Only when he's in a temper," Alice said. "There's worse out there. Not much worse, but worse."

Ella ground her teeth, her heart thudding with rage.

"It started when we moved to London," Alice added. "We were all comfortable in the country, weren't we? His lordship hardly ever came to visit. We looked out for each other when he was in residence."

"Oh, Alice," Ella said, feeling a wave of despairing guilt. "There's so much that I didn't understand about my own family."

"You needn't worry about Lord Peregrine," Alice said. "Anyone can see that he has eyes only for you."

Ella climbed out of the bath, her feelings veering between misery and joy, shame and exhilaration. Alice helped her put on her nightgown and then left her with one candle burning at her bedside.

A proper candle, not a tallow candle.

Starlight curled up beside her, purring while Ella tried to make sense of the day.

Finally, she came to the conclusion that her uncle's ill will and evil actions were not her responsibility, as Mrs. Quimby had advised her before the ball.

It wasn't an Unkind Thought to realize that about him.

In fact, Ella had an uneasy feeling that her wish to avoid UTs had not served her well. Unkind Thoughts were part of life and trying to ignore the dark things around her was closing one's eyes to reality.

Her uncle's cold, ruthless eyes were a fact. His actions were fact. It wasn't unkindness to acknowledge that. Her feeling of revulsion when close to him? Factual—not an Unkind Thought that should be banished.

But on the flip side, Fiennes's warm eyes and deep goodness were real, too. He was a gentleman of a different kind, his privilege considered and earned. His fortune shared, never gambled.

Starlight went back to her bed, and Ella curled up to sleep.

Only to wake with a pounding heart a few hours later.

Had she heard something? She sat up with a bolt of fright. Was that a footstep on the creaky wooden stairs leading to her room? She looked about wildly for a weapon, something she could use to fight off her uncle—

Surely not.

Her fears were absurd.

She was his brother's daughter.

Would he really harm her?

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

TREES AND HOW TO CLIMB THEM.

That noise was not from the staircase.

Ella's head swung sharply, trying to locate it.

Her lips opened to scream, hopefully loud enough that Jarvis would hear her on the level below, but at that very moment, she heard a rumbling curse.

Her heart thumped once and settled.

She hopped out of bed and went to the window, peering out at the moonlit garden. "What on earth are you doing?" she called.

Fiennes was making his way steadily up the sturdy oak tree outside her window. "Something I haven't done since childhood," he growled, reaching up to grasp a tree limb, his arm muscle flexing. "And for bloody good reasons," he added.

He wasn't wearing a coat, and his linen shirt was almost transparent. Ella settled down to enjoy herself.

Her heart was still beating fast, but for a much better reason now.

Fiennes caught the branch with his other hand and pulled himself up until he could throw a leg over the tree limb.

He was just below her now. He wore no hat or neck cloth. His hair was tousled, his cheekbones made sharper by moonlit shadows.

"Good evening, my lady," he said, as if he were in a ballroom, rather than a tree.

"Don't bow," she told him, laughing. "You might fall down."

"If you wouldn't mind backing up," Fiennes said, "I shall hurl myself across the divide between us."

She stayed where she was in the window frame, her breath quickening. "It is not proper for a lady to welcome a gentleman into her bedchamber at night."

"The hell with propriety." His deep voice surrounded her in the quiet night, full of desire and promise. "You're my wife as of today, and I need to

know you're safe."

"I *am* safe!"

She felt safe—now that he was there. She moved away from the window so he could enter.

One long, muscular leg emerged over the sill, then another, and then Fiennes was standing before her, wearing only breeches and a white shirt. Ella sat down on her bed, her eyes widening. "Your stockings? Coat?"

"They would have made it harder to climb the tree," Fiennes said. "I couldn't risk falling, Ella. Not before I've bequeathed you my worldly goods."

Tears pressed at the back of her throat. "Oh, Fiennes."

"No crying," he said, sitting down and pulling her to him. "Your hair is darker when it's damp—or is that just the effect of moonlight?"

"I was too tired to dry it properly." She rubbed her cheek against his shoulder. "No one has ever cared for me enough to climb a tree."

"To the contrary, Josephina proves her affection regularly by climbing that very trunk," he said dryly. One of his hands ran through her tumbled, damp curls. "I would like to bathe you."

"Fiennes!"

"Tomorrow," he whispered in her ear. "Tonight we'll merely sleep."

Ella shook her head at him. "I presume that you refuse to leave."

He didn't bother to answer, just kissed her.

"There's only one bed," Ella gasped when he pulled back.

Fiennes eyed her from under thick lashes. "We can place a pillow between us. I believe that's what affianced couples did a few centuries ago."

She was silent.

His eyes were tender, but also hungry. Sweet but lustful.

Ella smiled.

"Or not," Fiennes breathed. He bent his head, and then they were kissing long and deep.

Ella savored the way her body yearned for him, the rasp of his quick breathing, the joy of simple human contact. "I just realized that no one has touched me in years," she said with a gasp.

"Making love involves rather more touching than we're doing at the moment," Fiennes said. "We could stop."

"If we didn't stop ... what would come next?" Ella asked.

"I would disrobe."

“You may certainly do that,” she said with a giggle.

Fiennes stood up and began to undo the four buttons at his neck. “It must have been a terrible shock when your parents died.”

Ella nodded, her eyes glued to his movements. Her voice came out breathlessly. “My uncle sacked my maid, who had been my nanny.” She had been starved for affection beyond Jarvis’s kindness and her aunt’s infrequent compliments.

“We will find your maid,” Fiennes said, pulling his shirt from his waistband.

“I called her Marguerite, but I don’t know her family name.”

“Your uncle will tell me.”

“Unfortunately, I don’t think he wishes me well.”

“I’ll pay him,” Fiennes explained. “Anything you want from him, just tell me.”

“I don’t want *anything* from him!” Ella said vehemently. “Earlier, I realized that I don’t really know my aunt,” she added, registering that Fiennes’s calves were burly and muscled, covered with a fine layer of black hair.

“I expect few people genuinely know their relatives. I certainly didn’t understand my mother.”

“Why didn’t my aunt leave my uncle, since she had a lover to go to?”

“Perhaps the lover is married—or a member of the clergy. How could she leave, Ella? The countess had as few options as you did. Without a husband, she would have no income. Where would she go?”

Ella winced. “You’re right. Of course, you’re right.”

Fiennes reached backward and hauled his shirt over his head. “My mother refused to be in the same room with my father for decades, and she *did* have money of her own. Why not leave? Or if she loved him, why not fight for him? At the very least, demand that he apologize for his mistress?”

“If you take a mistress, I shall likely murder you,” Ella informed him. “Does that count as fighting for you?”

Fiennes tossed his shirt onto the rocking chair and turned back, his eyes laughing.

Ella fell silent. The contours on Fiennes’s hard, powerful chest were shaped by muscle, rather than by ribs or fat. A mat of hair covered the area where his breasts would be, if he were a woman.

His hands paused at his waistline. “We needn’t be intimate, Ella. We can

wait until tomorrow.”

She was too riveted by his half-naked body to understand his question for a moment. Her eyes flew to his, and she shook her head. “I don’t want to wait.”

He chuckled, leaned forward, and brushed a kiss on her lips.

When Fiennes’s breeches were off, followed by his smalls, Ella suddenly remembered that she understood little more than the bare mechanics, and those only due to growing up around livestock, in the country. Her mother had never broached the subject, of course.

“You’re a virgin,” Fiennes said, his eyes searching hers.

“Of course, I am!”

“There’s no ‘of course’ about it,” he said, standing still so that she could eat him with her eyes, gobbling up the way his thighs bulged with muscle, the swell of his calves, his broad, powerful feet.

That other part of him, which stood proud and tall, almost reaching his bellybutton.

“I do not agree with the mores that insist on virginity,” Fiennes said. “Your cousin is not a virgin and had I not met you, I would have agreeably married her.”

Ella’s eyes flew to his face. “How do you know?” Her voice came out in a horrified squeak.

He laughed. “We never even kissed. The first night in the theater box, Fulvia made it clear she understood the connotations of ‘grappling’ with a man. At the ball, she played an experienced young woman, until she took on the role of Juliet and played a desirous maiden.”

Ella blinked, pushing away the disorienting conviction that she hadn’t known anyone in her family. Her uncle was violent, her aunt adulterous, her cousin lusty. Being this unobservant couldn’t be put down to her ban on Unkind Thoughts.

“You were a working woman,” Fiennes said, stepping close to her and tipping up her chin. “Living in the attic, working as an unpaid housekeeper. You didn’t have time to analyze your relatives.”

“I didn’t live in the attic when we were in the country,” she told him. “Are you going to read my mind for the whole of our life together?”

“God willing.” Fiennes caught her up and laid her gently on the bed, stretching himself beside her. “It’s surprisingly erotic to be naked while you are clothed.”

Ella rolled to her side and edged closer to him. His tongue stroked into her

mouth.

“I am your family now,” he muttered sometime later, when she was as naked as he, her nipples cherry red from his kisses. He was braced on his elbows above her, feverishly kissing her mouth.

“All right,” Ella said, more interested in tracing the swell of muscles on his back. She was memorizing the way they swooped down to his lean waist.

“I mean it. I can read your eyes, Ella. You can read mine.”

She could.

At this moment, for example, Fiennes was desperate with desire, yet afraid to hurt her. With a surge of bravery, she moved so that his shaft notched against her softest part. “In that case, what am I thinking?” she whispered.

A moment of utter silence was broken by a rough sound that broke from his throat as he sank inside her.

Ella let her eyes tell him that she didn’t feel pain, but pleasure.

“You will know if I even think of adultery,” he whispered roughly. “Not that I would ever dream of such a thing. I know you, Fenella St. Trevelyon. You are mine, and I am yours.”

His hips moved slowly.

“Read my expression,” Ella suggested.

He studied her face. Then he smiled and surged forward in a strong stroke. Another, another, another, hard and deep, raw and fierce.

Hours later, she collapsed on top of him, exhausted by three orgasms and a whole new favorite activity.

Just before she fell asleep, she heard him whisper one word. “Mine.”

Ella wasn’t the only person who needed a family. A mother who hid in her chamber didn’t sound like a very loving parent.

She raised her head and smiled down at Fiennes’s heavy-lidded eyes.

“Mine,” she countered.

Satisfied by the love she saw on his face, Ella tucked her cheek into the curve of his shoulder and fell asleep.

She didn’t stir until the darkest hour, just before dawn. The hour when a house is at its quietest, and even the ever-busy London streets scarcely make their presence known beyond the occasional rattle of a carriage.

Her fiancé had swung his legs off the narrow bed.

She was still blinking when Fiennes jerked open the door.

Her uncle fell into the room.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

THE SHAME!

Ella flew out of bed to Fiennes's side. He stood in the shadows cast by bright moonlight, watching as her uncle stumbled into the center of the room.

The viscount didn't seem to notice that the door had magically opened for him.

"Niece!" he bawled, even that one word slurred.

Fiennes nudged Ella slightly behind him. "Careful," he breathed. "He's sozzled."

"Get out of bed, you jade," her uncle rumbled, cursing as he caught his shin on the rocking chair. "Or stay in it, if that's what you'd prefer. Don't think I've overlooked how you stole my daughter's husband. Your talents must be potent." He chuckled drunkenly. "Potent ... Ha!"

Fiennes took a step forward into the streak of moonlight pouring through the window.

The viscount squinted at him, fighting to focus his glare. "Peregrine," he grunted. "Not that I blame you. That gown she wore ... where is the tart, anyway? Asking for it, she was."

"I am here, Uncle," Ella said, staying precisely where she was: in the shadows, safely out of reach behind Fiennes.

"Man in her room. There's the bloody proof," her uncle muttered. "The women in my family are brazen whores. I should have opened a brothel. Could have used—"

Fiennes's fist caught him under the chin. The viscount staggered back but managed to catch himself on the iron railing of Ella's bed. "Damnation!" he squealed, clapping his hand to his face. "You've rattled my jaw!"

"Do you want another?" Fiennes asked coolly.

The viscount bared his yellowing teeth. "Think I'm afraid of you?"

To Ella, the air in the attic felt thick with the promise of violence: radiating not just from one enraged man in the prime of life, but also from her reckless

uncle, unable to calculate the odds even in a situation as clear as this.

She put a hand on Fiennes's arm. He glanced at her, his gaze piercing. What he saw made his shoulders relax.

Just like that, danger receded.

The threat of blood and perhaps death evident on Fiennes's face faded to the alertness of a man on guard.

"Uncle, why are you in my bedchamber?" Ella asked.

"Need to put you in your place," he said, glowering at her. "Peregrine will be marrying my daughter—*my* daughter, not James's daughter."

Fiennes looked at her and mouthed, "Your father?"

She nodded.

"I suppose you're already his mistress," her uncle said. "Your cousin might object, mind you. But keep it in the family, eh?"

"Uncle, Fulvia married Thomas Woodward by special license," Ella said, managing to keep disgust out of her voice.

Off to the side, she saw that Josephina was wide awake, sitting alertly beside the hatbox, her tail lashing. The cat's eyes caught an unsettling glint from the moonlight as she stared at the intruder to their peaceful attic.

"The hell she did," the viscount snarled.

"Marriage by special license cannot be invalidated if consummated," Fiennes said. He left the obvious unspoken.

Caving at the waist like a rotten tomato, the viscount collapsed into the rocking chair. "Most beautiful woman in London! She could have anyone. I promised her a rich husband."

"Fulvia didn't want a rich husband," Ella said. She may not know her cousin as well as she thought, but she knew Fulvia's essential nature. "She loves the stage more than anything, certainly more than money. Mr. Woodward is a leading actor, so she will spend her life in and around the theater."

"Ruined!" the viscount spat.

True.

Fulvia may be ruined in the eyes of polite society, but Ella had the feeling that her cousin would consider herself the opposite of "ruined."

Fiennes took a step backward, out of the moonlight, nudging Ella behind him again. He was watching her uncle closely. His hands had relaxed, but Ella didn't make the mistake of thinking that the viscount was no longer in danger.

“Uncle, perhaps you should go to bed,” she suggested.

He visibly shivered. “Got ‘nother question for you,” he said, peering into the shadows where Ella stood sheltered by Fiennes’s bulk. “Did you know?”

“About Fulvia? I was as surprised as you were,” Ella assured him. “I knew Fulvia had visited the theater several times, but I had no idea she’d come to know an actor well enough for him to ask her to marry him.”

“I suspect *she* asked *him*,” Fiennes said. “Very Romeo and Juliet.”

“Not that,” the viscount said hollowly. “The other.”

“Careful,” Fiennes murmured, just as Ella figured out what her uncle was talking about: his wife.

His wife and the baby.

“I know nothing,” she stated.

The viscount’s head swung up, eyes narrowed. Ella felt a streak of fear and edged closer to Fiennes. Glancing down, she saw that his right hand had curled into a fist again.

“How could you fucking know nothing?” The words scraped against the air. “You’re the housekeeper, nose in everything, changing the bloody sheets.”

Ella was gratefully conscious of Fiennes’s towering body. “I didn’t—I never went into the viscountess’s bedchamber,” she said, stopping when Fiennes shook his head.

To her horror, her uncle pulled a gleaming pistol from his breast pocket and began turning it over in his hands, mumbling curses under his breath.

“Damn it to hell,” Fiennes breathed. He put Ella squarely behind him. “I thought that coat wasn’t hanging properly.” He said over his shoulder, “I’m going to move toward the door, Ella. I want you to stay behind me.”

“I can’t!” Ella whispered. “What about Starlight, Josephina, and the babies?” She wouldn’t put it past her uncle to use Starlight for target practice. He’d shot out a mirror in the drawing room once, in a fit of rage.

And Josephina had bitten him.

Fiennes said something savage under his breath. The hatbox was on the opposite side of the room.

Eyes fixed on the viscount, Fiennes stepped to the side, his right arm extended to make certain that Ella came with him.

“Cuckolded,” the viscount groaned. He swung his head up. Fiennes stopped moving. “I’ve thought about killing her. There’s no court in the land that wouldn’t excuse me, a lord. My wife is no more than a trollop.”

“You would be tried by the House of Lords,” Fiennes remarked. “That would be unpleasant. The child will still be your heir, if male.”

“Aye, that’s the rub,” the viscount mumbled, looking back down at his weapon.

Fiennes slid to the side again. They were almost at the chimney now. Starlight leapt forward, hair standing up on her back. Ella crouched down before the hat box. Josephina was wide awake, her eyes shining.

“Don’t worry,” Ella whispered.

Gently, gently, she tilted the box just enough so that the little family slid to the back. Then she picked it up and stood.

With infinite patience, Fiennes moved toward the door. They were almost there when the abrasive sound of a pistol being cocked ripped through the room.

“I should just blow my head off,” her uncle growled. His language was more slurred than it had been.

“Then you wouldn’t get the settlement I’m giving you for the honor of marrying Ella,” Fiennes told him, moving again, keeping his large body between Ella and the firearm.

“Damn right, you’re going to have to pay,” the viscount muttered, caressing the barrel of his weapon. “Suppose you don’t think this is loaded. Well, it is.”

“The settlement,” Fiennes repeated.

At the same moment Ella said, “No one knows of my aunt’s indiscretion, Uncle.”

“But I do,” he snarled. “The shame is more than I can bear.” He ran a finger down the pistol again. “This was your father’s, you know. Like everything I have.”

Fiennes soundlessly opened the door.

Her uncle raised his head. His face was haggard, eyes gleaming with rage.

Fiennes jerked his head, and Ella flew through the door, Starlight at her feet. She turned only to see with horror that Fiennes was walking directly toward his uncle.

The viscount lifted the pistol and aimed at him. “Wouldn’t happen to you, would it? No woman will cheat on you. Talked your way into my namby-pamby niece’s bedchamber, prig that she is.”

Movement a blur, Fiennes snatched the pistol with one hand and twisted the viscount’s arm with the other. He jerked him from the seat, seemingly

holding him upright because her uncle hung from his grip like a baby kitten in its mother's jaws.

"Ella." His voice was utterly composed.

"Yes?" The word wavered, but truthfully, the shock of the last twenty minutes was starting to make her feel physically ill.

"I'm sorry to ask you, darling, but could you please take this weapon from me and, keeping it facing away from you, place it very gently on your bed?"

Ella set the hatbox down on the landing outside her door and walked to Fiennes. She gingerly took the pistol, putting it on the bedspread as gently as she could.

Behind her she heard a thump, and sure enough, when she spun about, her uncle was on the floor.

"I'll take the weapon," Fiennes told her uncle. "In the future, if I see you within fifty yards of my wife or my mother-in-law, I'll have you thrown in prison. I have friends in the constabulary. Viscount or no, you can be certain that you would never again see the light of day except through bars."

Fiennes bent over. Ella caught sight of his face and swallowed hard.

"I have a feeling that you pinched my wife on her arm," Fiennes said, his voice flinty.

"No," her uncle said dully.

Ella couldn't hear when Fiennes said to her uncle, but the older man shuddered and rolled on his side, curled like a snail.

"It's the shame that I can't take," the viscount said dully. "I just can't take the bloody shame of it."

Then, when they were through the door, and Ella took a huge gulp of air, she heard a last bellow.

"If only it wasn't the fucking butler!"

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

TIL DEATH DO US PART

Fiennes had never bothered to imagine his wedding beyond the expectation that someday a woman would walk toward him down the interminable aisle of a cathedral, and they would mutter half-hearted vows to each other.

Marriage to Ella was nothing like that.

His bride arrived at his house in the wee hours, her aunt in tow. Rather than place Ella in her own bedchamber as propriety obviously dictated, he took her straight into his own room.

Into his arms.

He didn't want to let her far from him; he was too shaken by the viscount's irrational threats. Ella had no real idea how vicious her uncle truly was, or how lucky she had been to escape unscathed.

Make that *relatively* unscathed. He had suspicions about the bruises on her arms.

Besides, Starlight, Josephina, and the babies couldn't be moved from room to room simply due a few vows in a church. At least, that's what he told himself as he held Ella tightly, unable to sleep, watching dawn creep into his windows.

Trying to convince himself that she was safe.

The marriage ceremony was held in a small church down the street from his house. His two butlers acted as witnesses, the viscountess being too fatigued to leave her new bed.

Fiennes himself was so exhausted that he felt dizzy; his bride was white as a sheet, faint blue circles under her eyes.

Tired or not, their eyes met while repeating the ancient words that bound them together. He could read her expression. Ella loved him.

And her smile told him that she knew how he felt.

Finally, he put a ring on her finger.

Fiennes's entire body relaxed. Ella was as safe as he could make her.

He leaned down and kissed her. “Hello, Lady Peregrine,” he said quietly.

His wife smiled. Her eyes were a little glossy, and he had the feeling his own were as well. The ferocity of his vow that he would stay with her until death had unsettled him—and settled him, at the same time.

He was hers. She was his.

Ella tucked her hand around his arm. “Breakfast, Lord Peregrine?”

They walked back to the house slowly, the two butlers having hastened away to supervise breakfast.

Jarvis led them into the morning room, where a magnificent wedding feast awaited them, and then left them to enjoy their meal in private. No footmen were assigned to serve them either, in a tacit acknowledgement of their new status.

Earlier that morning, Ella had met his household staff, greeting them with her customary friendliness. Of course, she knew more about their work than did any other lady in all England.

For their part, they responded to her instantly, clustering about to tell her odd details about his house that he hadn’t known, such as the fact that the fireplaces smoked when there was an east wind.

Jarvis had taken notice, so Fiennes had the feeling that even if future winds came from all four quarters of the world at once, his chimney would never smoke again.

Fiennes ate mechanically, his eyes on his wife. He felt as if a beast lurked under his skin, one who had managed to lure a beauty to his lair.

“I am finding this very odd,” she said, regarding Fiennes with an adorably shy look—interesting, because she was not a shy woman.

“Is it odd being my wife?” He liked saying that. *Wife*. What a lovely word. He’d never appreciated it before.

She dimpled at him. “Actually, no. Being married to you feels right, not odd.”

A surge of happiness went through him. *That* was odd. He was more used to feeling indifferent.

“It’s Jarvis,” Ella said. “He’s behaving precisely as he would have yesterday, but the entire household heard my uncle’s bellow!” Her eyes told him the rest. She was truly shocked to learn that her aunt and butler were lovers.

“Jarvis is a man of parts,” Fiennes said.

“What on earth does that mean?”

“Your butler has great abilities and even greater dignity. Your aunt didn’t take advantage of him, although he was one of the household employees. I like him.”

“I just think that it’s odd that we brought my aunt and her lover to your—” She caught his eye and corrected herself. “To *our* house. Imagine if someone in polite society knew the truth!”

“Luckily, no one does, and it’s none of our business who your aunt takes to her bed,” Fiennes observed. “I’m surprised she chose adultery over homicide, given the state of her marriage. Do you suppose that you’ve eaten enough, Ella?” He couldn’t stop himself. He stood up and walked around the table. “May I?”

Ella looked up at him with clear eyes. Happy eyes. He wanted to snatch her up and carry her to the bedchamber.

“Was there something you wished, Lord Peregrine?”

“I’d like to kiss you, to start.”

She jumped to her feet, giggling.

Fiennes realized his fingers were shaking. He lowered his head and kissed her.

“Hot chocolate,” Ella murmured against his lips. Then, pulling back, “I thought that men preferred strong tea.” Her palm rounded his cheek. “Kiss me again?”

“Of course.” He scooped her into his arms and backed unerringly into a strong-armed chair to the side of the morning room. Something tight in his chest unfurled as he kissed her. He didn’t pull back until she was breathless and flushed.

Ella nipped his earlobe with her teeth and then smirked at him mischievously. Fiennes was aware—not for the first time—that he would do anything, give anything, to see her smile every day.

“Could we kiss some more before the day begins?” she asked.

His kisses were possessive and fierce. Everything in him wanted to roll into their marriage bed in a tangle of limbs, but Ella had made plans to meet with the housekeeper. His wife thought that intimacies were to be reserved for the nighttime.

She truly was innocent.

“Touch me,” Ella gasped.

“Touch you ... where?”

She picked up one of his hands. “Here.” She put it directly on her breast.

His hand instinctively tightened, and an incoherent sound broke from her throat.

Fiennes nuzzled her earlobe. “Do you like this?” He brought both hands into play. Ella tipped back her head and arched her back into his caress.

Another whimper urged him on. He cast a look at the door, but Jarvis was surely standing guard outside.

The mere sight of her dazed, longing expression made him kiss her again, hard. “Could I persuade you to retire upstairs with me?” he asked. “All I want in the world at this moment is you and a bed. We needn’t be intimate if you are uncomfortable.”

“How could I be uncomfortable after last night?” Ella whispered. Her voice was raw with desire.

“I thought perhaps you might be sore,” Fiennes said. He cleared his throat.

“A tiny bit,” she admitted.

His heart sank.

“You could kiss it better,” she whispered. She turned pink, but her gaze was a potent mix of tenderness and desire.

“May I *lick* it better?” he murmured, his thumb rubbing over her nipple. He had been delighted when Ella had thrown away all maidenly reserve in bed, using his body for her pleasure and taking delight in her own.

“I would agree to that,” she said with a nod. A naughty chuckle escaped her mouth.

They spent the entire first day and night of their marriage in bed, occasionally collecting meals that had been discreetly placed in the corridor outside.

The household tried to avoid that corridor, but as one of the housemaids told another later that night, “It wasn’t just moaning and the like. I kept hearing bursts of laughter too.”

At midnight, Ella woke from a refreshing nap to find her husband lying on his side, his head propped up on one elbow. He was winding her red curls around his fingers.

“Hello,” she said drowsily. Her eyes caught on the hard swell of his upper arms and felt a flush rising up her throat. Her stomach tightened at his expression. She looked down at the wide head of his cock, flushed red and already standing tall. “Is it terrible that I want you again?”

The low groan that came from Fiennes’s chest told its own tale. He rolled on top of her while Ella registered that her husband would *never* think that

terrible.

Sometime later, she was tucked against his side, both of them catching their breath, damp with sweat, when Fiennes asked, “Ella, may I give your father’s will to my solicitors?” He caught himself. “*Our* solicitors.”

Ella lazily raised her head. She felt so happy that a mention of her uncle didn’t bother her. “Do whatever you wish. Here’s another idea—we could simply frame it.”

“Why?”

“It’s not lost any longer,” Ella said, a bit dreamily. “The house is gone, and the Northern estate ... well, we have enough, don’t we? We can leave that estate for the new baby.”

“By the time your aunt’s child reaches manhood, your father’s estate will be gone, lost in the flip of a pair of dice,” Fiennes told her.

She swallowed hard.

He kissed her. “I’ll get it back even if I have to buy it.”

“I don’t want you to buy it!” Ella protested. “My father left those lands to our children.”

She reached out and trailed a finger across Fiennes’s chest. And then further down.

“At this rate, those children will be with us sooner rather than later,” Fiennes said, grinning.

“I feel so greedy,” Ella confessed. “I no sooner stop—well, stop quivering—and I want to do it again.”

Fiennes put his hand over hers and wrapped it around his cock, erect again. He drew their hands slowly upward. “You are not alone in that, Ella.”

She leaned in and licked his lower lip again. “You did say that you wanted as many children as Josephina has.” She chuckled, a fragment of a laugh. “A shared project, so to speak.”

Lord and Lady Peregrine spent two long, delightful weeks avoiding society, straying from their bedchamber now and then to share meals with Ella’s aunt.

Away from the stress of her husband’s moody invective, the viscountess lost the green tinge in her complexion. Jarvis was often seen escorting her to the gardens at the back of the house and keeping her company on a bench, though no one said a word.

Fiennes paid his staff above market price, and they were loyal to him. None of them were more loyal than the former viscount’s maids, their spirits

revived like wilted flowers given water. The young women rejoiced to join a household where they were valued, paid for their labor, and assured that no one would ever enter their bedrooms uninvited.

Fiennes had offered the viscount a lump sum covering the furniture and belongings left in the St. Trevelyon townhouse, so Jarvis oversaw the transportation of everything to storage.

On the last day before transfer of ownership, Fiennes suggested that they visit the townhouse.

Ella wrinkled her nose. "My uncle never put any money into upkeep. I was shocked at its condition when we arrived in London, and it must look even worse now."

"Please?" Fiennes asked.

Which meant that a few minutes later she accepted a wildly fashionable *chapeau de paille* from her maid. The straw hat had a large brim with no less than three curling plumes and a striped ribbon to tie under her chin.

"Very attractive," a husky voice said in her ear.

Ella tipped her head back to smile at her husband and found herself kissed so hard that the straw hat tipped to one side. She emerged flushed, her heart beating quickly. "We needn't visit the house," she whispered.

His breath was uneven, but he shook his head. "My carriage is waiting."

Fiennes lifted her into a rakish open curricle that allowed them to greet friends and acquaintances. Not that Ella knew many people yet, but smiling at them, her darling parasol tipped just so, she had the satisfaction of knowing they knew perfectly well who *she* was.

The viscount's daughter who had married the richest, most handsome man in the city.

And the dearest.

Outside the St. Trevelyon house, their groom jumped down and went to the horses' heads. "We won't be long," Fiennes said, his large hands closing around Ella's waist as he lifted her from the curricle. "I asked your uncle to meet us here."

Ella blinked at him. "Why on earth did you do that?" She clutched his arm. "Oh, Fiennes, what if the viscount has another pistol? He might still be angry at you for rescuing my aunt."

"You need not worry, darling. I've offered him an allowance. I'm probably the person whose safety he cares for most. After his own, of course."

"Isn't that a sad observation?" Ella said with a sigh. "All right. Let's get it

over with. I doubt he will actually appear.”

A smile touched Fiennes’s mouth, and she changed her mind.

The viscount was wandering around the library, scowling at the empty shelves. His eyes raked down Ella’s body. “Don’t you have fine feathers.” But his scowl lacked force.

“Hello, Uncle,” she said. “How are you?”

“Is Tyrwhitt meeting us?” the viscount asked, ignoring her greeting. “I expect you’d like me to watch him take possession. Kick a man while he’s down.” He gave Fiennes a glare, but there was a cringing note to his voice that made Ella’s smile widen.

Fiennes pulled a crumpled piece of paper from his pocket and held it up between two fingers. “Do you recognize this?”

The viscount’s eyelids trembled, but he said nothing.

“You might not since you were rotgut drunk while making the bet, according to the squeals of laughter that accompanied the tale I heard.”

“I might.”

“It’s your handwriting,” Fiennes stated.

“No will had been found at that point,” the viscount shrilled. “*My* house and *mine* to dispose of as I—”

“True, you disposed of property you believed to be yours,” Fiennes broke in. He handed the slip to Ella.

She read it before gaping at him. “How did you come by my uncle’s pledge?” She held it up. “You didn’t buy it, did you?”

Fiennes’s eyes met hers: grave, courteous, and everything she ever dreamed of in a man. Not that she’d dreamt of Fiennes, because who could imagine a man like him?

“I won it,” he stated.

“You won my house?” the viscount gasped. “By all that’s holy, I wouldn’t have thought you had the bottom for it. I’ve never seen you in the cardroom.”

“I don’t gamble, as a matter of course. I played a round of snooker for the house that has been in your family for generations.”

“Excellent,” the viscount said, rubbing his hands together. “All in the family, eh?”

“No.”

“What?”

“It’s no longer your house,” Fiennes said.

“No need to be petulant. All’s well that ends well, eh? You can give me

back that pledge,” her uncle said to Ella. “A man needs a place to live, after all. Your husband’s solicitors took possession of the Northern estate.”

“No,” Fiennes said.

“Why not?” her uncle snarled, his eyes narrowing.

“I am giving the house to Ella as a wedding present.”

Ella’s mouth fell open. She leaned into him and rubbed her cheek against his shoulder. “Oh, Fiennes.”

“A thorough renovation begins later this week.”

“You don’t need two houses,” the viscount said craftily.

“But Fulvia needs a house,” Ella said.

“Fulvia!” Her uncle snorted. “She can’t live in a fashionable area like this! I heard the other day that she might actually take a part on the stage. A St. Trevelyon on the common stage!”

“Yes, I heard the same,” Ella said. “We shall be there for opening night of *King Lear*. I gather she has a small part, but I’m certain that with time your daughter will become a lead.”

The viscount shuddered. “I should have blown my head off when I had the chance.”

“If and only if Ella wishes, we will lend the house to your daughter for her use,” Fiennes said. “But if so, she may not do more than welcome you to a meal now and then. It is not your house, and it never will be again. In short, you cannot pledge it on a toss of the dice.”

The viscount humphed. “Mighty strange to be a visitor to one’s own house.”

“Your allowance is sufficient to live in your club or take lodgings,” Fiennes remarked. “That is, if you don’t make me angry. I’m certain that Fulvia’s husband will inform me if you threaten her or anyone in the household.”

“Why would I?” The viscount tossed his head and scooped up his hat from the floor. “You summoned me here for a ritual shaming, but if you’ve had your fun, I’ll go my way.”

“Good afternoon, Uncle,” Ella said.

She turned and threw herself into her husband’s arms. “You know how fairy tales always end?”

Fiennes shook his head. “Not really. The frog kisses the princess? Something like that.”

“No,” she said, gurgling with laughter. “They live happily ever after.”

“Oh.” He captured her mouth, kissing her until her lips were swollen and her eyes— “This house is empty,” he observed.

“We couldn’t!”

As it turned out ... a wall is just a vertical bed.

* * *

TOWNHOUSE BELONGING TO LORD AND LADY PEREGRINE

THE FOLLOWING YEAR

March 16, 1816

Lady Peregrine was in the nursery (again), hanging over the crib (again), staring at her daughter Charlotte, who was precisely two months old today.

Having just been changed and fed, Charlotte was lying on her back chewing on one of her big toes. “I couldn’t do that,” Ella told her daughter, leaning over the railing so she could tickle her round tummy. “I do think you are the cleverest baby in the whole world, aren’t you?”

Charlotte smiled around the foot and made an agreeable sound.

“Don’t you agree with me, Nanny Banks?” Ella asked.

Naturally enough, a nanny has to be a politician. Nanny Banks had been trained by the very best, and she understood her place; she had almost been selected to serve in the royal nursery, after all, and had confidentially been informed that the only reason she wasn’t selected was due to her red hair.

The queen was afraid of red hair. Since Lady Peregrine and Charlotte both had an abundance of red curls, she was welcome in *this* nursery.

“I dare say, my lady,” Nanny said, which is how she greeted all of the young mother’s more foolish comments. It wasn’t customary, having a mother who couldn’t keep herself out of the nursery, but Nanny couldn’t say Lady Peregrine was doing any harm.

Her ladyship insisted on keeping the window next to the crib wide open, but thankfully, the air was balmy this morning. The babe had recently learned how to babble, which her mother and father thought was marvelous—for sad to say, the duke was as foolish as his wife.

But that was the way of the world, to Nanny Banks’s mind. She kept snapping out sheets and hanging them to air before the fire, planning the conversation she would have with the housekeeper, Mrs. Dace, later in the day.

These sheets hadn't been properly folded: She saw a crease, a distinct crease. She pretended not to notice when Lord Peregrine ducked into the nursery, kissed his wife on the back of the neck, took her hand, and drew her away. The two were something else, but secretly, she liked the way his lordship looked at his wife.

On the windowsill, a curious sparrow hopped closer to the crib.

"Don't suppose you have a piece of rusk for me, have ya?" He cocked his head at Charlotte.

The baby took her foot out of her mouth and smiled at him. "I can try crying and see whether Nanny gives me another one."

"Naw, she'll flap her apron at me," the sparrow said. He glanced over at the fireplace and then took a short flight to the end of the crib. "So how's the world looking to you, Lottie?"

"Lottie," Charlotte said. "I like it."

"*She* won't," he said, eyeing Nanny. "Not proper enough for a lady like yerself. It's a housemaid's name."

The baby narrowed her eyes. "No. I'm Lottie."

Something about her demeanor convinced even a jaundiced London sparrow that she meant what she said.

Which explained why Miss Lottie Peregrine debuted at the age of sixteen with her closest friend, Lady Sophia, daughter of the Duke of Lennox.

The assembled guests at the Duke of Lennox's ball found it hard to say who was the more beautiful: Lady Sophia was exquisitely regal.

But Lottie, with her madcap red curls, enchanting grin, and very (very) stubborn chin?

Lottie was ravishing.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

AN EPISTOLARY CHAPTER, AS THE BEST GOSSIP IS EXCHANGED BY LETTER.

JONAH CECIL CRAWFORD LLOYD, DUKE OF LENNOX
TO HIS CLOSE FRIEND, LORD FIENNES PEREGRINE
SENT FROM HIS LONDON ADDRESS
August 4, 1815

Dear Fiennes,

I write because Viscount St. Trevelyon died last night. I'm sending this letter by one of my grooms, in hopes that you can share the news gently, before his wife comes upon the news in the papers. Please convey our deep sympathies.

The viscount was at Carlton House, and the Regent was up to his usual foolery. The details are confused, but the evening involved a great deal of port and a series of disgraceful boasts.

Given the extreme heat in London, the viscount was seated in an upstairs windowsill in the rear of Carlton House. The story has emerged that he leaned forward to engage with a courtesan. The woman took umbrage at being pinched and slapped his face. He recoiled, lost his balance, and fell backward out the window.

As you know, Carlton backs onto a cobblestone street, and in the normal course of events, he would have broken his head in an unpleasant but immediate fashion, but instead he fell just as a night-soil cart trundled by. You can imagine the outcome. One vivid account in the morning paper described him as sinking into the muck like an arrow into a haystack.

His lordship suffocated before the drivers were able to extract him.

Bea has a particular dislike of the viscount, due to her close friendship with your wife. She is muttering about the manifestations of God's

providence.

She is also insisting that I make certain the young courtesan suffers no consequences, which shouldn't be a problem. The Regent has issued no defense of his friend, and I believe he will turn his back on the scandal.

I expect the circumstances of the viscount's death will fill the scandal sheets for the next week. Given his wife's delicate condition, you might wish to conceal the papers.

You kindly inquired in your last missive about Sophia's sleeping habits. I am proud to report that she now manages a quiet slumber for six hours at a stretch. Bea is in a delicate condition once again, though, so we can look forward to more sleepless night. Bea will feel better in the country air, as London is stifling this summer. We leave for Suffolk tomorrow.

Yours most sincerely,
Jonah

* * *

LADY ELLA PEREGRINE
TO HER COUSIN, MRS. FULVIA WOODWARD
SENT FROM THE PEREGRINE ESTATE IN YORKSHIRE
October 14, 1815

Dear Fulvia,

The exciting news here is that your mama has married again! She and Mr. Jarvis married yesterday in a quiet service in the parish church. She is still in mourning, of course, but she looked very beautiful, with touches of white at her neck and wrists. As well as inexpressibly happy.

Fiennes and I have asked the new Mrs. Jarvis and her husband to care for the Northern estate. You know what a terrible condition it had fallen into; Fiennes has offered Mr. Jarvis a generous sum to bring the estate back to its former glory. I think your mother will be very happy there as chatelaine of the house she loves so much, albeit no longer as a viscountess. They will move immediately, so as to be comfortably settled when the baby arrives.

I'm thrilled to hear that you have been promised a role in the renewed production of *King Lear* when the Theater Royal reopens after the flood. I

agree with you that the actress playing the role of Cordelia was not entirely satisfactory. I thought your portrayal of the evil sister Goneril was magnificent, but of course you will shine in the lead role, if only they give it to you. We have our fingers crossed! If you are given the lead, I hope that the play will still be on the stage when we return to London.

Most warmly,
Ella

* * *

LADY REGINA CHARLOTTE HEYWOOD,
SISTER OF THE DUKE OF LENNOX
TO HER DEAR FRIEND, LADY MARTHA BROOKS,
COUNTESS OF SILVERTON, NÉE TELTON-SACKS
SENT FROM LONDON
November 12, 1815

Dearest Martha,

I'm writing to you from London because my sister-in-law and I simply cannot rub along together without friction. Beatrice is terrifically unkind, and of course Jonah always takes her side. It was a sad day for me when they married; I'm sure Jonah did it just to spite me, though he makes a great fuss about being in love. At any rate, we've agreed that I shall live in London with Lady Alcon as my chaperone. She's a fool, of course, but she doesn't bother me.

I hope your confinement is going well. I am entirely sympathetic with the horror you expressed in your letter, but darling, it's just as well that you are getting the loathsome business of hatching an heir out of the way early. It is *ghastly* to carry a child late in life.

Did you hear that Viscountess St. Trevelyon is carrying a child at her advanced age? You can imagine what it's done to her figure. When I last saw her, her ankles looked like turnips with slippers attached.

Never imagining she might be *enceinte*, she was made wretched by her enlarging girth and pitifully grateful for the advice and slimming recipes I gave her. I even found a diet tailored to older women. At the very least,

mourning clothing will disguise her bulk. If it is a son, one has to hope she doesn't name the son "Posthumous." I think it is such a dreadful name, don't you? I'm sure you've heard all the details of the viscount's demise, so I won't repeat *that*.

Speaking of the St. Trevelyons, darling, you would have squawked with laughter last night. You'll remember all the excitement last Season over Miss Fulvia S-T running off with an actor? Well, it's worse than that! She played a minor role of some sort in a Shakespeare play over the summer, but then the Theater Royal suffered a flood. It reopened last night with *King Lear*, a fantastically unpleasant play, but of course we were all there anyway.

Walking into the theater, I was immensely displeased to be ambushed by Fulvia, as brazen-faced as if she weren't *persona non grata*. She was handing out broadsides, informing everyone that *she* would play a better Cordelia than the woman who was assigned the role. Well! The curtain no sooner drew back than ruffians down on the floor—likely apprentices—started *howling* her name! The theater was in a total uproar, and after a half hour, they began the whole production over, with her in the lead!

I can't tell you what it was about because I loathe Shakespeare, especially a play in which a man is blinded. So revolting and uncivilized. I believe her character died at the end, but really, I couldn't be bothered to pay attention.

Just across from me, in a box, if you please, was the Countess of Eagleton. I told you *all* about that fracas. I can't believe that I even considered marrying the earl. People play up to her disgustingly, considering what she is—and I'm not even talking about the fact she's a by-blow. Last night, they were clustered around her, telling her that she was a credit to her race, and so articulate. As if!

Well, that's the end of my news. While I am disappointed to find myself facing a third Season, it's the fault of rapacious women who simply won't accept their place. Not that I wanted to marry Lord Peregrine, but he married a housemaid, which is nearly as bad as Eagleton's choice. I'd rather stay unmarried than lower myself in such a manner.

Hopefully that won't be the case. Lady Alcon reports that the Arch Rogues (you must have heard of them) have ceded to their mamas' wishes and have—all three of them—pledged to find wives this Season. It's just as well because they must be at least thirty, having been at Oxford together all those years ago.

But of course, their titles make them ageless as far as the Season is

concerned. I don't want to sound bitter, but it is difficult to be facing my third Season. I fully expect to hear whispered comments about my age, but I fancy I look at least five years younger than I am.

I know you are managing the indignities of motherhood as well as anyone possibly can. It will all be over next month. I'm sure you'll be back to yourself by the time the Season proper opens. I can't wait to see you.

With all best wishes for your confinement,
Lady Regina

* * *

BEATRICE LLOYD, DUCHESS OF LENNOX,
TO LADY ELLA PEREGRINE
SENT FROM SUFFOLK
December 1, 1815

Dear Ella,

I was so happy to receive your marvelous news! Just think: our babies can play together once they are old enough.

You must come stay with us for a month or longer next summer. By then your baby will be six months old, if your midwife is right about the baby's arrival.

I would bring Sophia to you—but I'm carrying another child! My midwife estimates mid-April, so we can put all three babies together and let them roll around or squall, as they wish.

In other news, Regina stamped out of the house in high dudgeon, saying that she can no longer live with me. She also informed Jonah that he married me just to spite *her*, which is characteristically absurd.

Remember the advice you gave me, about allowing myself to think unkind thoughts, but not utter them?

I have been telling Jonah everything at night, but I promise that I did manage to avoid wrangles with Regina, until she produced a medicine she bought from a newspaper.

I was supposed to gargle with it before each meal. Supposedly, it would make me so nauseated that I would be unable to eat, and I would thereby

achieve a waist as slender as her own.

I couldn't hold my tongue, Ella. A month or more of unkind thoughts just flew out of my mouth. And thus she left.

Since we won't be in London for the Season, we have hired a chaperone for Regina: Lady Alcon! She was horrible to me during my Season, so Jonah was against the idea.

But I convinced him. The poor woman has to make a living. Moreover, she mostly bullied me about my weight, and Regina will give her no anxiety in that regard.

Sending you much love, dear friend,
Bea

* * *

MR. NOAH JARVIS
TO LORD FIENNES PEREGRINE
SENT FROM NORFOLK
December 11, 1815

My lord,

I am very happy to report that the blessed event yesterday was uneventful, and mother and son are resting comfortably. Mrs. Jarvis will write as soon as she has gathered strength, but she came through the ordeal with utmost courage.

Mrs. Jarvis insisted that the child be given my first name, Noah. Please reassure Lady Peregrine that my wife and I will do my best to raise the new Viscount St. Trevelyon in a loving manner that will lead him to honor the title he inherited.

I am not a man to wear my heart on my sleeve, but I was surprised by an overwhelming feeling of joy yesterday, so much so that I briefly lost my composure.

In that spirit, then, I will venture to put on paper an emotion that I would never express in person: Your and your lady's kindness has meant the world to my wife and me.

Many a night we have discussed the difference between your wife's brave,

unceasing kindness and Fulvia's less evident affection.

That is not to say that Miss Fulvia (as I am accustomed to addressing her) does not feel genuine affection for her mother, but her triumph in *King Lear* means that she has many claims on her time.

I'd like to share some information given to me last week as regards the canal running to the west of the estate ...

* * *

LADY ELLA PEREGRINE
TO BEATRICE LLOYD, DUCHESS OF LENNOX
SENT FROM YORKSHIRE
January 16, 1815

Dear Bea,

Congratulations on your marvelous news! I hope that the newest family member didn't make you too ill to enjoy Christmas treats.

The fact that Regina stomped out of the house made me very curious about whether she stomped back in for the holiday. It may be optimistic, but I would hope that hearing a month of UTs (Unkind Thoughts) did her good.

We will happily come stay with you next summer, baby in tow. Frankly, I cannot wait until this child arrives. Fiennes can't leave the house because he is needed to haul me out of chairs.

This morning, my midwife kept her ear to my belly for a full five minutes and assured me that, though my belly is mountainous, she can only hear one heartbeat. The child must take after Fiennes, given the size and the kicking going on.

Addendum.

Dearest, I am picking this up after a week because the very day I began writing to you, the 16th, Charlotte was born just before the stroke of midnight!

Lottie has my hair and I'm afraid, poor scrap, that she has my temper too. She arrived in the world with a bellow of rage and has spent a great deal of the last week complaining.

Luckily, she loves the breast (like you, and most unfashionably, I am nursing her myself). Lottie also loves her papa. Fiennes can lure her to sleep

with his deep voice. Yesterday I woke to find him reading her *The Morning Post*.

I get teary at the thought even now, but he gave me the most wonderful present in honor of Lottie's birth. He had hidden it under the bed and pulled it out just as soon as I staggered out of the bath (you know precisely how I felt at that ungainly moment!).

Fiennes managed to find a portrait of my mother holding me as a baby, which my uncle had sold years ago. Mother is wearing the pearl circlet that I wore to my debut. So now I feel as if I have a little bit of her back, and I won't forget her face again, which is a blessing almost as large as Fiennes and Lottie.

Of course, he recovered the circlet as well, and now he is determined to find a portrait of my father.

I truly feel as if I fell into a fairy tale, Bea. I found a knight in shining armor to rescue me from the garret and restore my family.

Not to mention giving me a new one!

I'll leave it there, as I can hear Lottie bellowing from the floor above. I hope that you are well, and that your delicate condition, as they call it, is uneventful.

With great affection,
Ella

* * *

MRS. FULVIA WOODWARD, STAR OF THE THEATER
ROYAL AT DRURY LANE
TO HER MOTHER, MRS. ANNISE JARVIS
SENT FROM LONDON
March 30, 1816

Dear Mother,

After a *third* curtain call last night, Ella popped around to see me backstage. I was positively swamped with admirers, of course. That's the life of a star, or so the management of Drury Lane assures me.

But the most wonderful news is that next month my darling husband and I

will be playing opposite each other. They proposed *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, but there isn't a large enough role there to encompass my talents. I told them: Give me *drama*!

They have complied (of course): the play is called *The Maidens' Consent*. I play Francisca, being forced to marry a rich man, although I've fallen in love with Felix, despite living in a convent. I fully expect the papers to go mad, given the similarities to my own life. Theater Royal will be assigning grooms to take me to and from my carriage so that I am not overrun by admirers.

Ella mentioned that you would like to hear from me more often, but I can make no promises in that regard: I'm sure you would be happy to see how rich and full my life is.

You will be interested to learn that my darling husband and I have agreed to have no children. My career would be damaged, and we doubt we would be good parents. At least, I doubt that I would be a good mother. I have no interest.

We made wills a few weeks ago and left little Noah our estate, with a considerable sum set up in a trust he will receive at the age of eighteen. I wouldn't want him to turn into Father, trying to support the viscountship by gambling.

It's such a relief not to have to depend on Lord Peregrine's allowance. My understanding is that he will bequeath the London townhouse to Noah as well. Between us, we'll make certain my brother has a stable future. With love and kisses to Noah and Mr. Jarvis (how strange it still feels to address him as "Mr.!")

Your loving daughter,
Fulvia.

* * *

LORD FIENNES PEREGRINE
TO HIS WIFE, LADY ELLA PEREGRINE
ON HER BIRTHDAY.

Dearest Ella,

You told me once that you felt as if you tumbled into a fairy tale, which would make me your knight in shining armor. I feel as if it should be the other way around.

Before I met you, I lived in a gray world. But every time I put my arms around you, I feel as if I've walked into a love story that I can scarcely believe is my own. You know my father wouldn't let me come home after I was sent to boarding school.

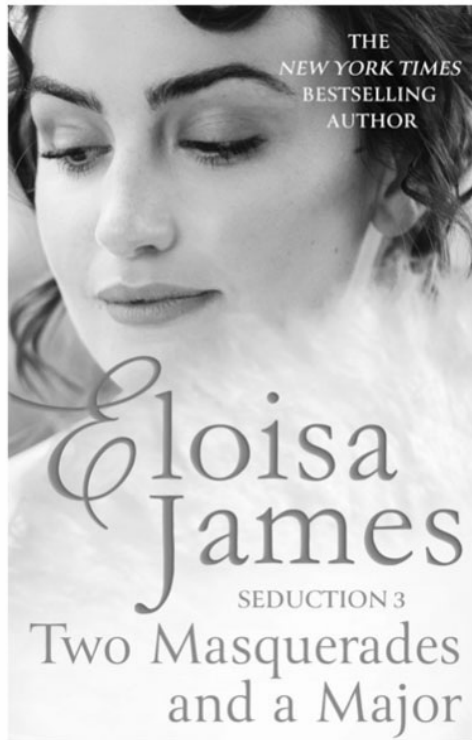
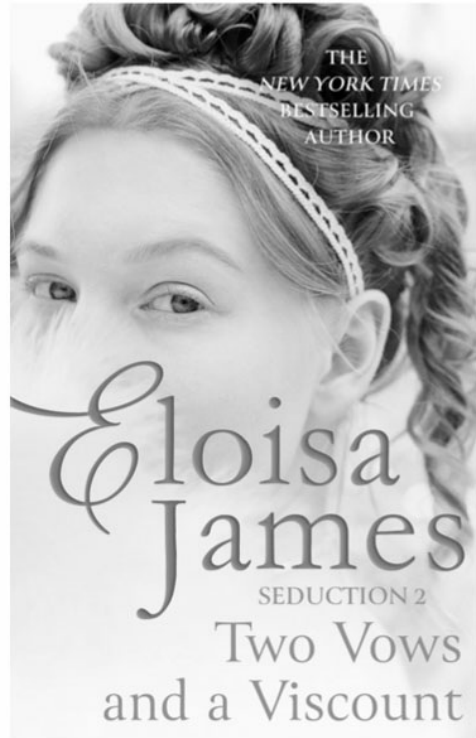
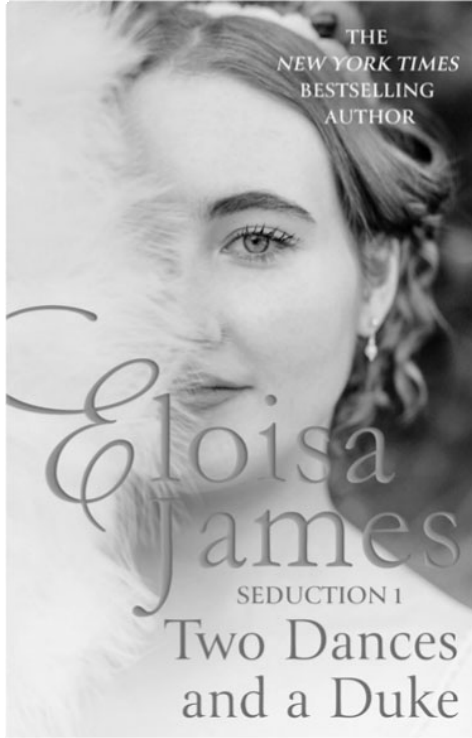
When I am holding you tightly, when we make love, I am home.

I love you, now and always.

Fiennes.

The Seduction continues!

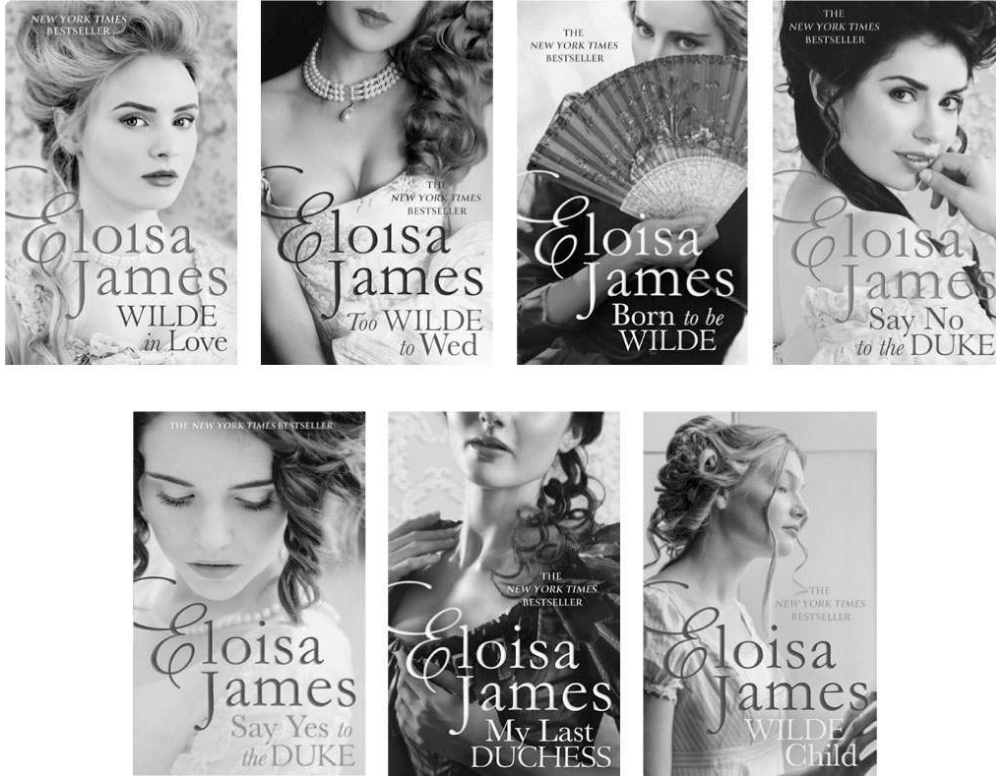
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